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JUSTIN HUNTLY McCARTHY

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NEW YORK
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THE GLORIOUS RASCAL

'HE GLORIOUS RASCAL

CHAPTER I

CATS

HE earliest recollection François could conjure up was of great stretches of white with little black spots ı them in the far distance. Long after he compared impression to a piece of ermine on a great man's hood. ıally the great white spaces were so much snow, and ɔok the little black spots to be cats, but they were not Little François had crawled from the room and the and crept out into the black passage and down the case, whose timbers squeaked and winced in their iness even under the imposition of so slight a weight ıe pressure of a child's footsteps. At the foot of the s the street door was left ajar, which it should not been, considering the snow all about and the black s upon it. But the Burgundian ruffian that lodged in garret, having drunk himself thirsty, had slipped out ıe "Fircone" round the corner for another gallon of e wine, and for his own convenience had left the door behind him as the wandering child had found it.

ɔ the child this seemed a great piece of good fortune. e was the door, just so far open as to show a thin, e slit like the edge of a sword—even at that age little ıçois knew what a sword was like—and the small boy ed his small fingers into the aperture and widened it ly till it yawned big enough for him to slip his ıutive body across the threshold where the fine dry

powder was more than ankle deep. There was little wind now, but there had been much wind, and it had blown the drifted flakes hither and thither with a caprice that seemed like artifice, so cunningly had it contrived to adjust the mantle of winter to the bulkheads and lintels and cornices and gables of the twisted houses in that twisted street. Just where the child stood and stared the street ran straight enough, with but a few houses to finish it off untidily before it lost itself in the fields. On the surface of those fields François saw the moving black spots and took them to be cats. He could never explain afterwards why he had taken them to be cats, and not dogs or pigs, the other quadrupeds with which his infancy was familiar. But he did take them to be cats, perhaps because he was fond of cats, or, at least, was fond of an old red cat that lived in the lodgings and was called Chandos after the English captain, and that purred sonorously in reply to pats.

The boy felt sorry for those cats out there in the fields. They must be cold, maugre their fur, and might be hungry, and already to his early sharpening senses to be cold and to be hungry were the two unforgivable ills. He was not cold himself that day, for there had been a fire in their room from the morning, and he was not hungry either, for there was food in their larder and he had eaten liberally enough, once and again. He was reminded now of what cold felt like, standing there on the edge of the snowy street; but for all the cold the snow tempted him, and he was making to paddle out further, with some dim thought of calling to those distant cats, and possibly playing with them, when the hand of destiny descended upon him.

The hand of destiny was also the hand of his mother, who had suddenly missed him from the little room above, and had pelted down the stairs and now grabbed him firmly —firmly, but not roughly. In all his life François never remembered rough deed or rough word from that dearest of illiterate gentlewomen. For a gentlewoman he later always swore her to be, albeit she was of humble birth and could not read the prayers she prayed so sturdily. Now she clipped him fast and asked him, not unkindly but

decidedly, what he would be at to give her such a fright, slipping out of the room for all the world as if he were a ghost and drifting to the doorway and the snow. For answer little François pointed to the white counterpane before him, and the distant fields that were pitted with those fascinating, pathetic black spots that were cats to his child's eyes.

"See, mother," he cried, "the poor cats yonder! Shall we go and play with them?"

Mother Villon gave one quick glance towards those distant fields and then clutched her boy to her bosom.

"Cats!" she cried. "My God, those are not cats!" And as she spoke she dragged the reluctant, struggling François within the shelter of the house. It was all done so swiftly that she was banging the bolts to with all her strength, fumbling for them with fierce decision in the darkness, before François realized that he had been snatched from all the delights and prizes of adventure.

"Mammy, the cats!" he whimpered, shivering there in the darkness that contrasted with the dazzling whiteness out of doors. The woman turned swiftly upon him.

"Cats!" she screamed, "cats! Those are no cats, child. Wolves." And even as she spoke she gave a dry sob and hugged the boy to her bosom. Little François, not in the least understanding what she meant, but terrified by her stress into knowledge of some peril overpassed, hugged her again, and so for a space the two sat together on the last step of the staircase and rocked in the safe darkness. After they had cuddled each other a little and the woman had gasped thanks to Heaven, they climbed the flight to their room. It was not so high a flight as it might have been, for they were not so poor as they were to prove hereafter, and the steps, narrow and black and twisting, seemed nothing to her. Mother Villon, as they climbed, rejoiced to have her child by the hand, out of danger of those skulking forms beyond, which the child's innocence had baptized cats. She knew how the ferocity of such a winter drove ferocious creatures well within the walls of Paris to pick what wretched pillage they might glean from

the tail ends of straggling Parisian streets. But they could not make their way through barred and bolted doors. So she mounted the high stairs with a light heart, and forgot all about the Burgundian ruffian that had his lodging over her head.

Indeed, she thought of the Burgundian ruffian as little as she could help, for he had disfavoured her with lewd glances of admiration—she being at that time still a comely woman—and even with direct salutation of lewd words—of all of which she took no heed, being a very virtuous and God-fearing widow-woman that, having no mind to marry again, had no kind of thought for other commerce. Therefore, as she went her way up the stairs, singing to herself and tugging her little boy by the hand, she was blissfully ignorant that in shutting the door she had shut out the Burgundian ruffian to the snow—and the cats.

Now this was the dreary time in Paris, for those that held by King Charles, and damned King Henry, when the English ruled in the good city and no citizen might count his soul his own who was not on good terms with the "Goddams," as Joan the Maid had nicknamed them. Over Paris actually, as theoretically over France, ruled an English king, who was also an English baby, known then innocuously and to be known thereafter disastrously as King Henry the Sixth. The English were allied with the Burgundians; therefore the streets of Paris swarmed with almost as many Burgundian soldiers as English soldiers, and it would be hard to say which of the militants of the two nationalities was the more dreaded by those Parisians who did not welcome the foreign rule. But the English soldiers have nothing to do with this story; they passed away while Master François was still a child. As for the Burgundian soldier, to the average Parisian citizen he was the synonym for a savage, truculent, blustering, ruffianly, and, on the smallest provocation in the world, murderous. Villon's mother honestly, and not very inaccurately, believed the Burgundian who lodged above her to incarnate all these disagreeable qualities.

CHAPTER II

THE BURTHEN OF THE BURGUNDIAN

THE Burgundian soldier came along in good time and soon realized a part of his misadventure. He followed the street none too steadily, carolling the burden of a ballad which every now and then weakened off into a wail like a Miserere. If the good man had his gaiety he also had his cares, and one of them was newly thrust upon him. He was carrying a flagon in the crook of one elbow, but he was carrying a different load in the crook of the other, and between the two burthens his temper flickered like an unscreened flame, and anon he skipped after a staggering fashion, as if he were dancing a saraband, and anon he went gravely, as if he were following the funeral of some great captain. While his right arm hugged lively grape-juice in a jug, his left arm nursed a lump of living flesh that was made up tightly in a bundle of old rags, out of which a small face showed all blue with the cold and as still as if sodden with sleep. There had been no thought of a child in the Burgundian's mind when he had gone out to gather a fresh load of wine at the "Fircone," and when the child was, as it were, thrust upon him, he was neither glad nor sorry, but muddled into a mixture of wonder and dullness that troubled his wits.

His immediate desire was to get indoors out of the cold, and drink himself into appreciation of the new thing that had come into his life. So it was somewhat of a cross to him when he saw that the door which he had left agape no longer stood open. At first he thought that it had been blown to by some draught; but when, after placing his flagon very carefully upon the threshold, he pressed against

it and pulled at the latch, he found to his chagrin that it was, indeed, firmly bolted from within. He cursed glibly as he rattled; then he began to bang lustily at the door with his clenched fist, and finding this unavailing, to kick furiously at the panels with alternate feet. As it chanced, the house was almost empty. It was no very desirable residence, and most of the rooms were to let and found no tenants. He that owned the house had very lately, without word said, withdrawn elsewhere to better quarters further within the city. Mother Villon and the Burgundian ruffian, though each was unaware of the fact, had the house all to themselves.

The man hammered angrily for some seconds before he succeeded in arousing the attention of Mother Villon, and by the time that she became aware of the din and opened the casement to discover its cause the Burgundian had ceased to thumb and rattle, having something more immediately important to think of. Certain black spots on the distant snow, unheeded by his bewined wits, had grown bigger, had come nearer, and presently some eight lean, hairy creatures brought their gallop over the snow to a pause, and huddled together at the mouth of the street, watching the soldier with red eyes. The soldier, drawing back from the door to look up and see if anyone in the house were coming to his aid, saw, and, seeing, felt a chill at his heart and a sudden soberness, which made the money he had spent at the "Fircone" no more than mere waste. As the soldier looked at the staring creatures, they shook themselves from their quiet and came trotting slowly down the street, sniffing and snarling as they went. Then the soldier, with some queer method ruling in his cleared brain, set his living bundle beside the flagon of wine on the threshold and drew his long sword; and he could not but give a sigh as he drew it, for he felt very sure that if the door were not opened speedily, he ran an ugly chance of being picked clean and never drinking his wine, to say nothing of saving the child.

When Mother Villon looked out of the window she saw the Burgundian crouched below her, with his back to the

door and his great sword gripped in both his hands. Behind him, on the threshold, lay two objects, a bundle and a jug, and in front of him, in a kind of demi-lune, were eight grey beasts with shining eyes and parted, silent, pink jaws. Mother Villon opened her mouth to scream, and then being a sensible woman shut it again, for she reflected swiftly that such a sound from above might distract the attention of the man below, and that to distract his attention in such peril was no other than to pronounce his death sentence. Quickly, with her clenched hands pressed against her cheeks, she considered what she ought to do. She hated the man, she hated his nation and his prince, but still he was a man and in dreadful jeopardy. What she should do was to hurry down stairs and open the door and give him that chance of shelter. But the opening that would serve to admit a big Burgundian soldier would also serve to admit a company of lean wolves, and there was little François to think of.

Hurriedly she closed the casement; hurriedly she called to the boy, and in a swift whisper instructed him. The moment she left the room he was to shut and bolt the door after her, and was not to open it again until he heard her voice calling upon him to do so. This was her thoughtfulness for his life. If, when the street door was opened the wolves should get in, they might make an end of her, but the boy would be safe. And though she hated the Burgundian, she knew that she had to go to his succour.

Little François could never make it quite clear to himself in later years how much of what followed he actually saw, and how much he learned from the narrative of his mother, who was never tired of telling the tale he was never tired of asking her to tell. The window of their room stuck out from the face of the house and overhung the road, so that even when the casements were shut fast, as they now were, a body might, by climbing on a chair, make shift to get a good peep into the street and see what was going on below. This was what little François did, and yet whether because after all it was not very easy to discern much through the grimy panes, or because he was of too

tender an age to understand fully what was happening down there in the snow, certain it was that what he saw then and remembered became inextricably mixed with what he heard later and remembered, never to be disentangled. Yet very surely he saw the soldier crouched alert, almost hams to heels, with his long sword held in front of him, and moving very slowly in a half circle like a slowly travelling flame. In front of him sat the company of wolves like the public in a play-house—this simile occurred to François long afterwards—squatting on their haunches and watching their man cunningly.

François reflected later that animals can be united as regards man by a common hate, but never by a common love. The wolves were agreed in their intention of attacking the human being. They were waiting for the best moment of attack, the moment when the man should blink, the moment when the steady moving of the line of steel should waver or flag or fall. But the man was on his guard; the man was in deadly earnest; the man was very anxious to save his skin, very anxious also to save his gallon of white wine, even dimly aware of a kind of anxiety to save the life of the child.

Now while the two hostilities faced each other, the door behind the Burgundian opened a little. He could hear it creak, and through the crack came a woman's voice; he could hear it whisper.

"In God's name," cried Mother Villon hoarsely, "be quick. The door is open behind you."

Whether it was because the Burgundian had swallowed so much strong drink, or because he was minded, finding safety behind him, to play the braggadocio, all that he did was to stay just as he was. But he spoke words.

"Woman," he answered—for he knew the voice for the voice of Mother Villon—"woman, there is a gallon of good wine on the doorstep. Take it in ere it freezes."

Mother Villon, shocked at the fellow's callousness, and yet in a manner staggered by his foolhardiness, might very well have found herself at once too indignant and too frightened to obey him. But as she involuntarily

glanced down towards the detestable pitcher of wine, she saw the other object that lay there as helpless on the threshold, the bundle that her instinct knew in a moment to be living flesh. With a soundless intake of breath she stooped, caught up the sleeping child and dragged it behind the door with one hand, while with the other she caught up the pitcher of wine. She was very swift in what she did, she was very silent; the wolves seemed to be too busy watching the Burgundian to give her any heed.

"Is it safe?" asked the Burgundian in a low voice, as his ears caught the faint sounds she made. He referred to the pitcher of wine.

"It is safe," Mother Villon whispered back faintly. She referred to the child. "Come in, fool, come in."

The Burgundian laughed an almost noiseless laugh.

"Wait a bit," he commanded. Still his swordpoint moved slowly like a hand on a clock-face, and while it moved, Mother Villon, full of wonder and fear, stood behind him in the dark passage, peeping through the inch-way of open door, and seeing a strange sight.

CHAPTER III

MAN AND WOLF

WHEN the alert Burgundian knew that his charges were in safety, he seemed resolved, instead of instantly beating a retreat by the way which Providence and Mother Villon had opened for him, to strike a stroke on his own account against his aggressors. Thus it was that François saw him make a sudden spring forward towards the inimical semicircle of beasts. Most of the animals scattered to right and left; one, that seemed the leader and the fiercest, made a leap at his assailant. This was what the Burgundian seemed to expect, for even as the wolf rose in the air the soldier gave a sudden turn and sweep to his long sword and cut the beast in two, and its halves fell apart upon the rapidly reddening snow. Then with a backward spring the soldier regained the threshold and banged to the door, knocking Mother Villon headlong as he did so with the child in her arms, but luckily, as he afterwards observed, doing no damage to his pot of wine, which the poor woman had put on one side mechanically out of harm's way when she had lifted it from its place. The Burgundian jammed the bolts home briskly, listened for a few seconds with a grim smile to the whinings of the wolves, and then turned to his preserver to set her dexterously upon her legs. He patted her upon the back too, kindly enough. After all, she had saved his life, if she had disdained his addresses. He was inclined to call the account quits.

Mother Villon stood there sobbing huskily, quite dry-eyed, her thin hands pressing the sleeping child against her thin bosom. She was realizing what would have happened if that door had been held open a little longer; she saw the stairs a shambles, the babe a mere mouthful, and

the narrow space alive with leaping fiends. The Burgundian picked up his pitcher with a smile; when all was said and done he had not lost his liquor. He offered the jug to the shuddering woman, but she shook her head; speech still denied her. Then the man tilted the vessel to his lips and drank long and gladly, while still outside beyond the thickness of the wood there came a whimpering and a scratching of futile paws. As the Burgundian drank, Mother Villon collected herself with an effort and began to ascend the stairs. The Burgundian, hugging his jug, followed her lumberingly. The sobriety commanded by danger had lessened with that mighty pull at the tankard—a pull that conjured back the cups that he had drained at the "Fircone." He began to sing in a hiccoughing voice a snatch of a lewd song:

> "I tumbled Kate, I fumbled Joan,
> I had a knee for each:
> I pinched the one on her funny-bone . . . ."

At this point in the delectable ditty the woman ahead, her late terror conquered by her present resentment, found her voice, and rated him.

"Shame on you, base fellow," she said sharply, "that can make so swinish a noise, and was so near your death but a minute ago."

The soldier, because of his gratitude, accepted the reproof in silence, but beneath his breath he cursed at kill-joys. And so they trudged up the stairs.

When they came to Mother Villon's landing the woman turned and faced the Burgundian.

"I want to hear your story," she said. "I want to hear what this child means. If I, that have saved your life, ask you inside my room while you tell your tale, will you swear to behave like a decent Christian man?"

The Burgundian had so much of the saving leaven of comradeship about him as to realize that he owed this concession to the woman that had been at the pains and risk to save his life.

"Have no fear, gossip," he answered. "I will be as

good as gold, and pretend to myself that you are as ugly as sin, and so we shall talk affably and part good friends."

Mother Villon, reassured by this promise, tapped softly at her door. François opened it at his mother's summons and stared with wide, childish eyes as he saw his mother enter with a bundle in her arms, followed by the big Burgundian with his wine-pitcher.

Far below, where the white carpet was smeared with red and pitted with trampled feet and the pressure of paws, the black cats of little François' fancy whined and scratched for a little while. Then a company of the watch came stumping by, cursing at the cold, and the wolves took fright and scampered off into the fields again, leaving their leader on the stones.

While the Burgundian huddled himself against the stove and sucked out advantage from his jug, and while François sat on the floor and stared at him, Mother Villon popped behind the ragged quilt hung on a cord that served to screen her off a sleeping corner. In a few minutes she came back with the news that the child was a baby-girl, seemingly over three years old, that it was alive and warm and might yet, with God's help, do well.

It had been in some way drugged to sleep, and so warmly swathed that the cold had not struck too hard at its vitality, and that vitality was slowly asserting itself under the tender and skilful ministration of Mother Villon. She heated milk for the little mouth to drink, she chafed the little limbs until they glowed with animation. Presently the infant woke to life from the artificial sleep that gripped her, and smiled as she blinked her blue eyes against the rushlight in its iron house.

Then, and not till then, did Mother Villon turn to the Burgundian, who sat silently drinking and watching her with dull, wondering eyes.

"Tell me," she asked, "how did you become possessed of this poor babe?"

The Burgundian laughed coarsely.

"No, no, gossip," he protested; "none of your suspicions of my honesty. The child is no by-blow of mine, nor have

I turned Egyptian and pilfered. I found it just by chance, as you might say, and having some bowels of compassion, made shift to bring it along with me."

"Tell me what has happened," said Mother Villon dryly, "and leave yourself out of the story."

There came an ugly look on the soldier's face, which seemed to suggest that he would like to answer Mother Villon's peremptoriness with a cuff on the ear. But he remembered what he owed her and held his hand.

"I was coming from the 'Fircone,'" he narrated, "where I had passed a pleasant hour or two with pleasant company—jolly lads and jolly lasses. Ere I left I provided myself with a measure of wine to carry home with me, for I know not how it is, but I have a thirst somewhere within me that is always a-popping of its head out of its hole and saying, give me to drink."

The soldier laughed as he said this and tilted his vessel to his lips. Mother Villon looked at him reprovingly.

"Go on," she said impatiently, when she found that the process of slaking thirst was being unduly prolonged. The Burgundian paused with a sigh.

"Well, gossip," he continued, "I had not got very far on my homeward way, and, may be, I was singing a little because of the merriment, and maybe I was staggering a little for the same good cause. Be that as it may, certain it is that I did not take good note of a hillock of snow that lay in my path. I thought no more than just to plough through it, but lo! and behold, it proved tougher than I guessed, and it was only by the mercy of heaven that I did not fall and spilt my liquor."

"For shame," cried Mother Villon, "to couple the name of heaven with your wicked wine!"

"Nay, nay," said the Burgundian good-humouredly; "let me thank heaven in my own way for its benevolence to me. Well, as I was saying, I nearly spilt my tipple. But this misfortune being spared to me—and, as I say, by the mercy of heaven—I was making to kick the snow-heap asunder, when what should I find but no other than the body of a woman."

"Oh!" cried Mother Villon, and hid her face in her hands. The man shrugged his shoulders.

"She was lying on her face," he went on. "The snow had shrouded her. She was stone cold and stone dead. I turned her over to see if she had any money about her, and there I found my missy yonder swaddled in flannels."

"Ah!" sighed Mother Villon, hugging the baby, "the poor little mite."

"Of course," pursued the Burgundian, "I made sure that the child was as dead as its dam. But not a bit of it. The brat was alive and asleep. It had lain under the woman's body protected from the cold, sheltered from the snow. The sleep that had killed the mother had not yet killed it, and its flesh was warm and soft when I prodded it."

"Oh!" groaned Mother Villon, again dandling the child in her arms and rocking to and fro.

"Well," continued the Burgundian, "it seemed to be fast asleep and I thought it was just numbed with cold; but it may be that what you say is true about its being drugged. I didn't know what to do, and for a moment I had half a mind to go my ways and leave the poor little rat to its fate."

"Oh, how could you! how could you!" moaned Mother Villon indignantly. The man eyed her angrily.

"Well, I didn't, did I?" he retorted. "She looked such a pretty, silly little piece of foolish flesh that I just picked her up, without a thought of the trouble she might prove to me. And what happened thereafter you know as well as myself, goody."

Mother Villon shook her head in reproval of the fellow's callousness, but she cooed over the baby-girl and fondled her, and the child, beginning to emerge from its torpor, made faint and feeble responses that delighted the woman.

"And what are you going to do with the child?" she asked as she dandled.

The Burgundian shrugged his broad shoulders. He was getting a little indistinct of mind and speech from his repeated libations.

"Take her to the gates of Notre Dame," he said, punc-

tuating his words with his hiccoughs, "and lay her in the foundling's cradle for whoso chooses to take."

"That seems a sad thing to do," murmured Mother Villon, as she gently hugged the infant.

"Nay," said the Burgundian, with a retching laugh; "you would not have me go tramping the world with a snivelling poppet on my back. I am off to Burgundy in a day or two to see if the Duke has any need of my services. And what would his Grace say if I came before him like an Egyptian with a human ape on my shoulder?"

"If you will leave the child with me," Mother Villon said softly, "I will take care of it."

She made this offer because she was so taken with the prettiness of the helpless little creature that had been so strangely brought beneath her roof. And yet she had a kind of pang at the heart as she made it, for she was hard put to it as it was to keep herself and little François going, without having another mouth to feed. But she could not let the poor innocent go to the foundling's cradle.

The Burgundian was a knave of the amiable disposition that is always disposed to say "No" to any proposition. Such was his instinct in this case; but a moment's reflection—so far as the muddled state of his wits permitted of any mental process that could properly be called reflection—made him think better of it.

"You can tend the brat and welcome," he assented grudgingly, "but 'tis your own choice, and you must not look to me for subsidy."

Mother Villon nodded her head, and so it was agreed. Mother Villon said nothing to the soldier about a small silk bag which she had found round the child's neck when she undressed it. The little bag contained a piece of folded paper with writing upon it and a painted shield. Mother Villon could not read script, nor blazoning, so she transferred the bag with its contents to her own pocket before she returned from the semi-privacy of the quilt curtain. She had some vague thought of showing the bag to the soldier, who was indeed no better lettered than herself; but his indifference as to what happened to the child irri-

tated her, and she resented his selfishness in refusing to make any contribution towards the child's maintenance.

Therefore, the little bag remained for the time being in Mother Villon's care. And thus fortune supplied small François with a smaller playmate, to his great satisfaction, and in a day or two the Burgundian went his ways back to his duchy and the house was quiet again.

CHAPTER IV

GIRL AND BOY

IT is not easy for a house to be quiet in which there are two children, one a baby-girl and one almost a baby-boy. Little François had gained him a playmate and was delighted with the change. Mother Villon had taken a new care upon herself and had to work the harder, that she might bear the burden without falling by the way. But she did manage to bear it, and to bring up her brace of babes, one her own offspring, one a nameless waif.

Not, indeed, altogether nameless. The shift that the girl-child wore on the night when she was brought to the house by the Burgundian, in the teeth of the wolves, was of exceeding fine linen. So much was apparent to Mother Villon's sight, to Mother Villon's touch. Also, it bore about the neck of it, worked in very fine stitches that asserted clever needlery, a single word that was a single name. Mother Villon could see the letters, but they conveyed no meaning to her. Therefore, as soon as the Burgundian had taken his departure, she went to one of her neighbours that was reckoned a great scholar, because she could read and could write after a fashion, and could even cipher a little, and Mother Villon carried the little shift with her and showed it to the learned neighbour, and pointed to the embroidered lettering. The learned neighbour looked gravely at the embroidery, and averred, without the slightest hesitation, that the letters that were worked upon the little garment represented in their total the name "Huguette." Mother Villon nodded her head.

"Huguette," she murmured. "That is no doubt the name

that her poor mother gave her and that she wished her to bear, and Huguette, therefore, the child shall be for me and mine. And I thank you kindly, neighbour, for your pains and grace."

And so Mother Villon trotted home again, and greeted the new babe with her newly-known name Huguette. And Mother Villon thought that the babe took notice and crowed responsive.

Slowly the boy and girl grew up together for a few brief years, that would have seemed like centuries to the children if children ever had any idea of what centuries mean. Springs that seemed interminable faded into dateless summers that were succeeded by endless autumns which were in turn engulfed by perennial winters. Through all these ageless æons the children played together and also learned together, for Mother Villon made shift to have them taught their letters, and their pot-hooks and hangers. And through all these ageless æons there came no word of the Burgundian.

As little François could recall her in later years, the Huguette of that date was a taking child, very fair and pale and yellow-haired, who was always clad in a blue gown. There was a curious steadiness on the child's mouth and an intensity in the child's eyes that gave her a precocious gravity. Thus it came about that in their games together the girl-child, for all that she was a girl and his junior, ruled the roast over little François, and when they filled their dim corner of the world with make-believe, as children do, François had always to be Huguette's vassal, obedient to her will. If François rebelled at times, he always surrendered in the end.

The end of all this nursery pleasantness came with the sudden and unexpected return of the Burgundian ruffian, after a lapse of years that had caused him to be well-nigh forgotten. He was more drunken and more ruffianly than before, and he took up his old quarters as if he had not been away for a fortnight, and Mother Villon disliked him even more cordially than she had disliked him before. What the business was that brought the man back to Paris

Mother Villon never knew and never cared. What she did know, and did care about, was that the Burgundian was still of an amorous disposition towards herself and took his instant rebuffing very sulkily. Thereafter he laid claims to a guardian's authority over Huguette which Mother Villon did not dare to deny him, and in the exercise of his claim he practically put an end to the playfellowship between the girl and François. For it amused the Burgundian to play parent to the girl and to sit her on his knee and tell her stories when he was in a good humour, and predict a wonderful future for her, and the stories and the prediction seemed to afford the little girl great pleasure, and she did not seem to miss in the least her hours of pastime with François.

But the Burgundian was not always good-humoured, and sometimes in his cups he would drub the girl till she cried, for all her courage. At such times François, hearing the strokes and the sobs, would work into a frenzy over his helplessness against the tyranny of strength, that could kill him with a pinch of finger and thumb. When the Burgundian was thumping drunk, Mother Villon herself did not dare to beard him, for in that mood he was murder. But when the distemper passed away from the man, he would fain make amends with some cap for the child's curls or kerchief for her throat, or shoes for her small feet, and these gifts always consoled the girl for her skelpings, and she peahenned in her frippery as proudly as if she were Balkis, Queen of Sheba. The boy always marvelled at this, wondering in his rawness that fine feathers could soothe a smarting back. But it was very plain that the girl loved fine feathers.

It was also plain soon enough that the Burgundian perceived that there might be a possibility of advantage for a war-worn rascallion in the possession of a comely daughter. As this idea grew upon him with a growing laziness, he became—except when he was very drunk—more careful of the child's body, beating it less and bedizening it more, and cultivating with a wit that if crude was not uncunning the girl's patent inclinations to vanity, luxury, and the other

members of the ancient and honourable fellowship of the Deadly Sins.

It was not long after the time when the Burgundian ruffian had arrived at his conclusion, that the Villons, mother and son, lost sight of the tragic pair. The Burgundian quitted his lodgings clandestinely, taking the girl with him, and never heeding to waste time or breath in saying farewell to his humble acquaintance. And this was the end of him and his as far as François and his mother were concerned, for many a long day.

CHAPTER V

MOTHER AND SON

IT did not occur to little François in his early days that his mother and he were poor. He took it for granted that all mothers and sons wore patched and shabby raiment, ate little and slept hard, and so made neither the best of it nor the worst of it. But gradually he was aware that other folk ate more than they did, were better housed; that children like himself went about in gaily-painted clothes, were scented with mellifluous essences, and waited upon by respectful varlets. As he had been curious about the animal wolves, so now he became curious about the human wolves, and would question his mother in many conversations.

"Mother," he would say, folding his little fingers over his little folded knees, "why is it that we have holes in our coats and often go hungry, while the other people in the big houses are warmly clad and have lots to eat and drink?"

"Because," Mother Villon would answer, "we are poor, my little son, and those folk in the next street are rich."

Then little François, snapping at the second problem first, would question again:

"Why are those folk in the next street rich?"

"Because they have great store of a commodity called gold and a commodity called silver, which has been bequeathed to them by their kin or garnered by their own wit, and these commodities give them control of all desirable things, rich clothes to wear and rich food to eat."

Little François would muse on this problem for a while, not finding it very satisfactory, and would then return to the first problem.

"Mother," he would ask, with a droll little expression of premature intelligence on his pinched face, "why are we poor?"

"My child," she would answer, "it is God's good pleasure that there should always be rich and poor."

Little François nodded acquiescence in a state of affairs that did not seem highly satisfactory. Then he fired inquiry at the heart of the target.

"Mother dear, why should we be poor and not rich?"

Mother Villon heaved a deep sigh.

"Because your father, poor man, was ever a one to spend money, but never a one to make money."

Then there would be a silence, presently broken by the small voice of François, piping thus:

"Mother, tell me something about father."

And Mother Villon, who had often told him about his father, would tell again, for the sake of the living interest lit in the childish face, and for the sake, too, of the memories it kindled of the days when she was young and comely and desirable.

"Richard Villon was your father, of an honest, well-to-do burgess house. My father was landlord of the 'Golden Whale' in those days——"

"Mother," François would interrupt, "what is a golden whale?"

"There never was a golden whale," Mother Villon would answer. "It is no more than a fancy like the dragons in the fairy-tales; but it was the sign of an inn and a good tavern too, that kept none but good company, and thither came one day Master Richard Villon with a merry set of friends, and he saw me and took a mighty fancy to me."

Master François, fondling his small chin, tried to think of his mother there present as one of the lovely princesses in the fairy-tales, but failed hopelessly and kept silence. Mother Villon went on:

"Because I was an honest wench and would have none of his nonsense, though indeed I liked him finely, it came about that he fell in love with me in good earnest, even to the tendering of marriage."

Mother Villon, enveloped in golden memories, allowed her voice to slur into silence. François, impatient, prompted her.

"Well, mother, what happened then?"

Mother Villon awoke from her reverie.

"Then? Oh, then I married him."

Another pause. Another question.

"Were you happy ever after, like the princes and the princesses in the fairy-tales?"

Mother Villon shook her head and smiled wistfully.

"No, little one, not exactly, not altogether. Your father was as good a man as ever lived, but he was not very well fitted for the rough-and-tumble, workaday world. He loved dearly to eat and drink and make merry with his friends, and he could do a number of things quite pleasantly, though, to be sure, no single thing very well. But any discomfort irked him sorely, and it vexed him that his family would have no commerce with him after his marriage."

"Why?" queried François, "would his family have no——" he halted, puzzled by the word his mother had used, and his mother answered him:

"The Villons were well-to-do, my child, and resented his marriage with a tavern maid. I was very proud of my Richard; he could read and write as easy as kiss-my-hand, and he was proud of me, for all my humble station; but his family's disdain hurt him and urged him to drink, and so he pined away and died, poor lamb! His family came to his funeral, but they never spoke a word to me, even in God's Acre, nor I to them."

"What happened after father died, mammy?" little François asked. He spoke of the event indifferently. He had not been above a year old when the event took place and death in itself had as yet no terror.

"I believed the poor dear was very well-to-do," Mother Villon continued readily enough, for she loved to gossip of her past, "for he always had a piece of silver in his pocket, and there was always a great plenty in table and larder; and when I was brought to bed, there was no grudging of the coins needed to make my time of travail easy.

But he left nothing after him save debts, and my own father, too, died a debtor and the 'Golden Whale' was sold to strangers, and you and I were cast on the world together, my precious."

Little François did not quite appreciate the meaning of his mother's phrase, but the way she said it depressed his easily affected spirits. She saw his dejection and strove to conjure it away.

"Bless you, my babe, I had cunning fingers and could make lace and did make lace, and you and I have lived on it, and none too badly neither."

"Mother," said the boy, after a thoughtful pause, "what became of all daddy's proud kinsfolk?"

The boy's imagination pictured them in gorgeous clothes with gaudy coat armour stuck all over their persons, though, in truth, they were no more than very modest burgesses of the third degree, or thereabouts.

"I think they came to little good for the most part," the woman said bitterly, "and little good did they deserve to come to. But there was one of them that poor Richard liked well enough, and that was his own brother Guillaume, and he, as I hear, has done well enough, entering the Church and being now a fat canon, no less, in one of our Paris churches."

Thereafter little François had a radiant picture ever in his mind of this mysterious uncle of his going about the world raimented like the blessed priests when they officiated at the masses to which his mother took him, habited in all the splendour of gold tissue and jewelled stoles. To his warm heart it seemed an unjust thing that his mother should dress so meanly and feed so meagrely and live so drearily, when all this while she had this opulent son of the Church in cousinship. The native shrewdness of François was fed and tempered by the conditions of his existence. The pinch of poverty has a quickening effect upon the wits. So the child was not at all for letting an exaggerated sense of dignity, which he did not understand, block the way to an alliance with a fabulously wealthy relative.

"Mother," he would say, "if we have a rich kinsman, why does he never pay us a visit?"

"Because he does not know of our existence," Mother Villon would answer fiercely. "I have taken care of that. I thought they might want to take you away from me, my ewe-lamb, because you are a Villon by the man's side, and so I have ever hidden apart since your poor father's death that they might not come at me."

"But, mother," the boy would plead, "it may be that my uncle is a kind man, and one that would wish to play fair with his kindred."

"He may wish to play fair, he may wish to play foul," said the woman; "I care not. I seek no friendship with the man that abandoned his brother because his brother would not abandon me."

And grim in that resolution, Mother Villon would rock to and fro, with a set look on her patient, gracious face, and little François would feel conscious that it was wiser for him to hold his peace. Being quick at the up-take, he saw that it was useless for him to ply his mother further with hints of reconciliation with this rich relative. But he reflected, none the less, being wise beyond his years, at the absurdity of a sense of pride which left his poor mother—and incidentally himself—ill-clothed, ill-fed and ill-fired. Villon's little inches swelled with a sense that he ought to do something to deal satisfactorily with so ridiculous a situation. In the fairy-tales his mother told him boys no bigger than himself did wonders in the way of killing dragons and giants, and discovering treasure and wedding beautiful princesses. He felt that it was his duty to do something of the kind to redeem the glory of the house of Villon and to make his mother more comfortable.

CHAPTER VI

UNCLE AND NEPHEW

IT did not seem to the prematurely sharp wit of the little Villon that there was anything base or unreasonable in making, as it were, signals of distress in the direction of an eminent ecclesiastic who happened to be a near relation. It seemed to the small boy that the attempt had to be made, and when a small boy arrives at such a conclusion, all the world over, and from the dawn of time, the small boy seeks to gain his end.

Warily and craftily the small boy set about his self-appointed task. All he knew of this mysterious relative of his was what his mother had told him, and she, good woman, knew in her pride little more of him than his name, Guillaume Villon to wit, and the fact that he was a dignitary of the Church, with the rank of canon and a living somewhere in Paris. Here, patently, there was not very much to go on, but, also, there was something to go on. Little François made up his mind that he was going to find out the whereabouts of Guillaume Villon, Canon of somewhere, or perish in the attempt.

The boy was not ill-equipped for his enterprise. Already he knew his Paris very well, and guessed where to go to find information. There was the beadle of the parish church with whose little son François had made acquaintance, and through this beadle little François learned that there was a certain Canon of St. Benoît, who happened to be named Guillaume Villon; that he lived in a fine house called the Red Gate, hard by the Tower of St. Jacques, facing the church of St. Benoît; that he was reputed wealthy, and that he had influential friends. Here clearly

was the uncle of the boy's childish dreams. Though he was but a child, he had long put the key of the streets in his pocket, and found his way about as well as an elder. So he lost no time in making a pilgrimage to the neighbourhood of the Tower of St. Jacques, and informing himself of the precise whereabouts of the Canon's residence. It impressed his youthful intelligence favourably. It was a comfortable-looking abode, with much carving about the doorway and great overhanging windows. It somehow suggested comfort and snugness within.

After a little while, François, leaning against a wall and watching the Canon's house, saw a stout cleric, with large, amiable face, and portly body that was clad in no such golden garments as the boy had pictured, come down the street and make for the Red Gate. François was all of a tingle instantly. Was this his uncle? should he venture to address him? what best to say? what best to do? While he was torn by these agitating thoughts, the portly ecclesiastic had passed into the Canon's dwelling, and even as Villon ran across the street, the door was shut in his face.

Villon wished he had the courage to attempt to effect an entrance to the Canon's house by the simple expedient of knocking at the door. He crept to the portal with a beating heart; his hand was almost raised to strike upon the panel, when the sound of footsteps inside the house startled him, and he skipped nimbly across the street waiting on events. The door opened and an old woman came out with a basket on her arm. She drew the door behind her without quite closing it and went her way down the street. When she was out of sight, Villon nimbly crossed the road again, and pressing against the door, pushed it a little way open and, greatly daring, popped his head through the opening and peeped in. He saw a small hall and a flight of stairs leading up from it. Tempted beyond restraint, Master François slipped into the hall; then holding his breath and tingling with excitement, he began very gingerly to ascend the stairs, pausing in an ecstasy of fascinated terror when any of them happened to creak beneath his feet, and the thing happened often.

When he came to the first landing he found a passage with several doors opening from it. He looked into one of these and saw it to be the Canon's bedroom. He tried another, opening it softly, and found himself in a small comfortably-furnished room, with a number of books against the wall and a table in the middle, at which a portly old gentleman sat and wrote. In the portly old gentleman Villon recognized the ecclesiastic whom he had seen enter the house.

Little François had slipped in so gently that his entrance had not attracted the attention of the writer, and he stood for an appreciable space of seconds staring and beating his boyish brains for some telling form of address. Presently the Canon, apparently in search of a word, lifted his eyes from his paper and turned a mild moon face in the direction where François stood and twittered. At first the mild moon face remained expressionless, its owner's intelligence too deeply drowned in his thoughts to come readily to the surface. Then gradually the moon face puckered and wrinkled into appreciation; there really was someone in the room, and that someone a small lad in shabby clothes with a pale, gaping face. The Canon stared at François and François stared back at the Canon, and for a moment or two neither of them spoke word. Meanwhile the Canon's perplexed mind began to clarify somewhat. The boy, he decided, must be there on some business of his housekeeper's. So the moon face smiled amiably upon the queer intruder and found voice.

"What do you want here, little boy?"

François was a quick-witted child and he found an inspiration. He ran forward and flung himself on his knees by the side of the Canon, exclaiming in a voice of such well-calculated emotion as only childhood desirous of favours can command:

"Uncle, dear uncle, I want you!"

Seldom has human countenance expressed more amazement than did at that moment the moon face of the excellent Canon. It does not often happen to an amiable and lettered ecclesiastic to be disturbed in his literary pursuits

by the sudden appearance of a ragged little rascal who claims him as a near kinsman. The Canon pushed back his chair and looked down upon François in frank bewilderment.

"God bless my soul, boy, what do you mean?" he asked.

François began to answer him glibly, having now no fear of the man and finding his nerves in steady order.

"I am your nephew, dear uncle," he continued. "My name is François Villon, and I am the son of Richard Villon, deceased, that was at one time your well-beloved brother."

The Canon pushed back his chair from the table and looked at the boy a little wildly.

"Had Richard a child?" he said aloud, more as if he were speaking to himself than to the child kneeling so demurely at his feet. But François took the question as addressed to himself and answered promptly:

"Yes, dear uncle," he said, "though my mother told none of you about me for fear that we should be separated."

The Canon put his hand under the boy's chin and turning up his face, studied it thoughtfully for several moments. Then he released it with a sigh.

"Poor Richard!" he said. "I had not seen him for many a long day before he died. Pride parted us and pride kept us apart, and afterwards it was too late for earthly reconciliation. I think you are indeed my nephew, for you have much of my brother's looks in your face."

He was silent for a few seconds. Then, "Is your mother alive?" he continued.

"Yes," the boy answered.

"I quarrelled with your father," the Canon went on, "on her account, and, likely enough, I was wrong in the quarrel and it is time to make amends."

His glance wandered over François, who had by this time risen to his feet, and showed him the wretched condition of his garments.

"You are meanly clad," he said sympathetically. "Are you and your mother in need?"

"Indeed, uncle," little François replied, "it is rarely that

my mother and I know what it is to have enough food to eat, fire to warm us, and clothes to shield us from the air. My mother works hard all day at the making of lace, but those she sells it to give her but little for it, and there is nothing I can do to help. When I am grown up it will be another thing," and he swelled his chest proudly; "but meanwhile there is very little in the larder, and I cannot remember when it was that I had this jerkin new, so long ago it is."

He held up the edge of the garment as he spoke, and his words sounded so pathetic in his own ears that his eyes filled with tears. The good Canon found them pathetic too. He rose and took the boy by the hand.

"Come, child," he said, "you must bring me at once to your mother."

Master François felt very proud of himself as he trotted through the streets of Paris, holding his excellent uncle's hand. Here was he, a ragged and hungry little rascal, actually taking the public air and inviting the public eye in the company of a dignitary of the Church. He held his inches as erect as possible, and but for his company he would have whistled with glee. On the way the Canon plied him with incessant questions as to his way of life, and uttered many sympathetic sighs and groans for the hunger and the thirst and the cold and the lack of raiment of which François, with an eye to artistic effect, dexterously made the most.

But Master François' exaltation received a wintry check when he arrived at his own dwelling-place and tugged the panting Canon up the narrow stairs that led to Mother Villon's garret. When Mother Villon saw the Canon and the boy enter the room hand in hand, she uttered a sharp cry. Then, darting forward, she seized François by the shoulder, and retreating into the room, she ranged her boy by her side and faced the visitor with hostile eyes.

"What is your business with me, your Reverence?" she inquired frostily, dropping a curtsey, which she made plain was to the Canon's coat and not to himself.

"My dear sister-in-law," the Canon began in an agitated

voice, with an apologetic smile upon his honest countenance. But Mother Villon, not to be mollified, interrupted him briskly:

"Who are you calling dear sister-in-law?" she questioned fiercely. "You are mistook, good sir; this is not the house you seek; there are no kith nor kin of yours to be found here."

As she spoke she gripped her son so tightly on his shoulder, that the pressing fingers hurt him. The Canon was embarrassed, the Canon was distressed; but he felt that he deserved no better reception, and he would not admit defeat.

"We were at fault," he admitted, "sadly at fault, and I for my part have always regretted it."

Mother Villon only sniffed derisively.

"Indeed," persisted the good Canon, "I made efforts to trace you, after I came into my canonship, but you had vanished as if you had never been."

"You may keep," said Mother Villon decisively, "your breath to cool your porridge."

The heart in the small body of François seemed to oscillate between his mouth and his heels. His mother's attitude towards this new-found and opulent kinsman was so uncompromisingly hostile, that François began to fear the worst, and waited for the Canon to fling out of the room in a huff. But the Canon was not to be offended.

"I have better use for my breath," he assured the angry woman with a smile. "I mean to use it for the unfolding a sober truth to you. Here we live, you and I, in a world that is divided into great people and little people. You and I, good sister, belong to the little people."

"You, indeed!" commented the woman scornfully, as she glanced over the Canon's well-clad, well-fed figure. Still the Canon smiled.

"Hear me out," he pleaded. "I am indeed of the little people, yet I am well set-up in worldly goods. And why am I so set-up? I will tell you. There are but two ways by which we of the little people can so climb as to rub elbows with the great people. They are the pathway of the

Church and the pathway of the Law. I walked the pathway of the Church to my physical as well as my spiritual advantage. Others as humble as myself have walked with like success along the pathway of the Law. Do you begin now to perceive my drift?"

Mother Villon said nothing, but François thought, and hoped that her frown was relaxing something of its severity. He looked imploringly at the Canon, who gave him a friendly nod of reassurance.

"Think, woman," said the honest Canon, with an eloquence that was underlined by genuine emotion, "what it may mean to this your son if I am permitted by your favour to extend to him such poor patronage as I can command. I can make a learned man of him. I can place him at the parting of the two ways to fortune, the Church and the Law. Who knows, if you live long enough, you may see him, if I have my way, a bishop on the one hand or a judge on the other? Have you, I ask in all sincerity, any equivalent advantage to offer the boy?"

Now the good Canon knew, as François had told him, that Villon's mother made but a meagre and precarious livelihood for herself and her son. The good woman realized this as well as another, and she sighed as she admitted the knowledge to herself.

The Canon saw that his words were having their effect, and he made haste to press his advantage.

"I am sure that the lad is a clever lad," he said earnestly and persuasively. "I am sure that he is a good lad, a promising lad, an honest lad. What can he hope for in your straitened home, under your hampered conditions? What can he not hope for in my ample care, under my influential guidance? I said just now that he might become a bishop or a judge: I pitifully understated the splendid possibilities. Why, if things go as they should go, there is no real reason why our little friend here"—and he laid his hand lovingly on François' head, and François looked lovingly up at him, as a lost dog looks when it hopes that some kind passer-by will adopt it—"should not hope to be a cardinal on the one side or a president on the other."

Already the good woman had been more than half won over. The thought of her little François, who was now so poorly clad and so poorly fed, wearing the habit of a priest, perhaps even in the fullness of time wearing a canon's coat like her unexpected visitor, greatly appealed to her. And there was scarcely less appeal in the picture of her precious offspring in the garments of a legal chief. But when the excellent Canon, tuning himself to a higher pitch, and, to shift the metaphor, baiting his trap with cheese of a richer toasting, began to babble of cardinals and presidents, poor Mother Villon's soft heart was dissolved like a lump of soda in a bowl of hot water. Thus, from being the very image of obstinacy, she suddenly softened her countenance, surrendered at all points, and found herself, to her patent astonishment and private satisfaction, clasped in the arms of a stout and amiable gentleman who patted her affectionately on the shoulder and called her dear sister.

CHAPTER VII

"TRAIN UP A CHILD——"

THE Canon was better than his word. He invited his sister-in-law and her son to dwell with him thenceforward at the Red Gate. Part of this favour the woman was stubborn to refuse. For her son's sake she would so far swallow her pride as to close with the Canon's offer to find little François in roof and food and raiment. But for herself she cherished her independence and her right to resentment against her husband's family. The sweet soul had her sour strain.

The Canon was radiantly happy. He had taken a great fancy to François, whose lively carriage had wheedled a hole in his heart. The Canon had been young himself, and though he had long forgotten the fact, he remembered it now, and rejoiced at the patter of young feet on his stairs, the echo of young laughter in his corridors, the sunrise of a young face over the edge of his table. Not that Mother Villon was to be wholly deprived of her child. It was settled that on certain days François should visit her, the Canon assuring her that she would find a welcome at the Red Gate whenever she pleased. But she never did please.

Thus early and auspiciously was François Villon set upon the path that was to lead to fame, fortune, felicity. It is to be feared that from the toe-mark he was temptable to wander from the path. To François, from the time when he was able to reason at all, the world about him was the book he liked best to read on. The streets were his scriptures, the squares his classics; the folk he jostled or dodged on causeway or kennel meant more to him than all the ancients of Greece or the venerables of Rome. When he

came to Guillaume Villon, he was a lover of the city, and the life of the city; if he knew little else, he knew his beloved Paris by heart and by heel.

As little François the boy had come to the Red Gate and as little François he persisted. But if the swelling years did not swell his bulk, he was a well put-together rascal, with a wiry mind in a wiry body. He always looked younger than his years; he always looked weaker than his veritable measure of strength. Through his ill-nourished childhood his field had lain fallow, but it was fertile and responded to the cleric's cheer. This filled his skin, brisked his heart, smoothed his cheeks and hunted hunger from his avid eyes.

So the days drifted with monotonous persistence. François was housed, fed, taught; a sedulous uncle smoothing the way to the University and the tragedies of the Trivium and Quadrivium. The lad was an unchancy pupil, quick to learn where he liked the lesson, less quick where he did not like. His uncle, being a good Latinist, made the language a colloquial pastime for him, but logic and theology found him less pliant, though he was from the beginning nimble-wit enough to seem to know more than he knew.

What most enchanted François in those early days was the acquaintance he made with a company of ghosts. He discovered in his uncle's library a brotherhood of books of verse, the "Romance of the Rose" and the "Romance of Reynard," and the rhymes of Adam de la Hale, and Rutebœuf, and Machault, and Eustace Deschamps, and many another battered bard. These proved friends, illuminators, patron-saints, angel-voices to the waif of the Red Gate. The lad was like the man in the fable who first found that if you squeezed a bunch of grapes with persuasive fingers the essence was very delectable. But François had discovered what was worse or better than the wine that tickles the body; he had discovered the wine that tickles the mind, and he drank of it with a thirst that was not to be slaked.

Here and now he learned with wonder and rapture that words, such as he changed carelessly with his uncle a

hundred times a day, were something other than mere counters minted for domestic use and workaday affairs. They were talismans that could translate you from a commonplace world into the illimitable kingdom of dreams. They were potencies that could shatter the walls of a dingy chamber and reveal through the riven lath and plaster visions of a celestial city. Those trivial mixtures of consonants and vowels could be so cunningly ordered as to voice a revelation from the height of the Seven Heavens. They slipped into the boy's fingers a magical key into an enchanted garden.

Those tuneful ghosts pricked his wits, kindled his ambitions. Not all of them were nightingales, but their songs were to the boy, as Meleager says of the songs of Sappho, all roses. Out of the lot it was old Rutebœuf that most commanded, Rutebœuf that was such a Parisian of Parisians, and next to him, Eustace Deschamps, with his sheaf of innumerable ballades. The ballade fascinated the lad: its difficulties, its intricacies, its obedience to immutable law. Soon he was trying his hand at like measures, experimenting clumsily, imitating servilely, but learning facility and dominion from his experiments and his imitations. Believe that as he pegged away at his measures he was the happiest boy in Paris.

And all the time that he was exulting in his discovery, which he had the sense to keep secret, his uncle the Canon was convinced that he had in him the makings of an excellent cleric and worthy successor to himself in the canonship of St. Benoît. Here was a prediction to make every gargoyle on Notre Dame crack with laughter.

CHAPTER VIII

FRANÇOIS RIDES ABROAD

SELDOM has a youth been lifted from the pit of adversity to so fair a prospect of fortune. Living well, learning easily, he saw the days go by him filled with sunshine, days welcomed idly and dismissed carelessly, days hereafter often to be remembered with a sigh.

When he was fifteen and looked younger a great event shook the stillness of his life. He went with his uncle on a journey to the court of a king. Far away in Anjou jovial King René was holding a tournament, to which all the gallants of France were bidden. The deeds of great folk have their consequences for the small. There lived at this time in Paris a great gentleman, Robert d'Estouteville, who had his own reasons, which were good reasons, for desiring to ride to Anjou. Robert d'Estouteville was a friend and patron of the Canon of St. Benoît. The Canon was of Angevin stock, and had a kinsman in Anjou, a cleric like himself, for whom he cherished a lively affection. Once in a blue moon this kinsman was able to make his way to Paris. Once in a blue moon the Canon was able to make his way to Anjou. The blue moon rose anew when the Canon, learning of Robert d'Estouteville's journey to Anjou, proposed to ride thither in his company and under his protection. And because he had no wish to be separated from his nephew, he further proposed to carry François along with him.

To the boy that journey seemed the most momentous adventure ever undertaken by man. He knew Paris well and something of the countryside around Paris, but there his knowledge of the world ended. Now he was to travel

afar and to travel in the fashion of an emperor. For Robert d'Estouteville was a man of substance financially as well as physically, and since he rode to Anjou in a state befitting his rank and wealth, it was as good to François as if the splendour had been his own.

The boy woke from a dreamful sleep to the blissful beginning of his travels. Mules were brought to the Red Gate by one of the knight's serving-men, and the pair mounted, the Canon with difficulty, but Villon with ease, for he had practised often enough the art of riding bare-backed on the horses that grazed in the meadows about Paris. So they picked their way through the narrow, filthy Paris streets, till they came to the dwelling of Robert d'Estouteville. Here they found the travelling company assembled, and presently the great man came down his stairway, a splendid figure clothed in gold and azure. He shook the Canon's hand, patted the lad on the head, mounted his mighty charger, and the whole party set off.

Every moment of the journey proved a bewildering delight. To see the world is the natural ambition of every lad of spirit. François had often eagerly watched bodies of troops marching through the gaping streets with flags flying and thumping music, and it seemed to the staring boy that the gaudy fellows were so many military divinities on their way to some Olympian bivouac. For a matter of fact, François knew something of soldiers, and he was as well aware as another that there was very little of the divine about the average fighting man. But with François merely to know how a thing actually was did not in the least interfere with his entertainment in making it appear to his happy fancy, for the time, quite otherwise. It gave an additional charm to actuality, thus to hide its grinning face with a mask of gold, like the corpse of an ancient king.

Another joy for François was the fact that he was wearing fine clothes for the first time in his life. They were only the cast-off apparel of a page of one of the Canon's wealthy patrons, from whom he had begged them for the purpose of decking out his nephew for the journey. But to François they appeared the most splendid garments

imaginable. Under the stress of his lively imagination himself became a king, his jogtrot mule a royal charger, Robert d'Estouteville no more than his generalissimo, and the good Canon his private chaplain. All the fairy-tales that Villon had ever heard seemed now to come to life and weave themselves into one story, of which he was the exulting and triumphant hero.

He was helped in his belief by the comfort of the journey. Messire Robert, in his generosity, had made the Canon and the Canon's nephew his guests; so wherever they halted they put up at the best inns. François had now forgotten for many a long day the pinch of poverty, but he could appreciate as well as any alderman the difference between the table of a wealthy lord and the daily diet of the Canon of St. Benoît. Thus the lad ate and drank like a monarch.

There were other boys in the company, pages of Messire Robert and his friends, with whom François soon made acquaintance. At first these springalds were inclined to treat him with disdain. But François was insidious, ingratiating, hard to oblige, snail to take offence. He could tell tales that were as gay as flame; he could sing songs of all kinds, nice and naughty. In a brief while the little bunch of brisk pages condescended to admit him to their fellowship and thereafter he got on very well with them.

There was one of their number, no other than Messire Robert's own privy page, that being a greedy fellow, fell sick from over-eating while they lay at Chartres, and was for a while upon the shelf. François alertly begged of his uncle to suggest to Messire Robert that his nephew would gladly volunteer to take the sick page's place for the time being. Messire Robert, who had taken some slight notice of François at the beginning of the journey, and who had been somewhat crossed by the gorging folly of his page, was graciously pleased to accept his offer. François had very little idea of the duties of a gentleman's page, but as he always observed everything that was going on about him, he had picked up enough knowledge of his new business to make him pass muster sufficiently, and what he missed in experience he made up for by a great show of zeal and

the prodigal display of his accomplishments, all of which ingratiated him into the heart of Messire d'Estouteville, who at that time was glad to be diverted and grateful to anyone who could afford him diversion. For Messire d'Estouteville had cares of his own which made him grave when he would sooner have been gay. And his gravity deepened and his gaiety dwindled the nearer he drew to Anjou, so that it taxed all his new page's intelligence at times to bring a smile to his face.

They reached Saumur on a radiant day. Every street was splendid with flags; silks and brocades swung from every window. There were triumphal arches everywhere that looked as solid as the monuments of Roman conquests, yet were no more than cunningly constructed fictions. Gilded masts supported shields of noble knights, and flung to the air the corresponding pennons. The fountains spouted wine, the feasting was ceaseless.

If the town of Saumur wore an air of jollity, it did but reflect and interpret the jollity of its inhabitants. Never before in all his life had the lad seen so many merry faces around him. In Paris, whatever feast, ceremonial, triumph, or procession might be toward, the lane of admiring spectators would be pitted with gaunt, hungry, evil, malicious, greedy, despairing, envious, imbecile, cruel, stupid, hateful faces. Here were none such. Saumur was as near a realization as heart of man could hope of the visionary Land of Cockaigne.

In Saumur, for the first time, Villon beheld a king whose bearing coincided with his ideas of what a king should be. He had, indeed, more than once in Paris seen King Charles the Seventh, and pitied the haggard face and jaded bearing of the disappointed man for whose sake Joan of Arc had died. King René had a well-nourished, well-carried body, and a countenance which seen thus distantly and respectfully, seemed to radiate health and cheerfulness. François recognized that if he could he would be a king like this king. The little Parisian licked his lips at the thought. What fun to rule a jolly dominion, and go richly clad, and eat and drink of the best and be smiled on by pretty ladies. Already

to the mind of François wine and smiles were cardinal delights.

François had not been many hours in Saumur before he was well aware of the reason which had spurred Messire Robert thither, and the cause of his sorrowful demeanour. A certain lady had come, as they had come, from Paris to Anjou. Her name was Ambroise de Loré. Ambroise de Loré was also her father's name and Ambroise de Loré the man was the Provost of Paris. François knew all about him. He began as a poor Breton rat, with no claim to a named father, though he was pleased to sport three gold cinque-foil on ermine. But he was a waggish, dashing rascal, who had managed to marry a noble lady who was Baroness of Ivry in her own right. Thereupon Ambroise de Loré became, by his own right, Baron of Ivry, and spent his wife's money jovially. That wife was an excellent fair lady, but not excellent enough to have the heart of her husband all to herself, and if for the most part he kept order well in Paris, he was reproached for being too gentle in his dealings with those light-o'-loves that were daughters of pleasure to their mother-town.

Ambroise de Loré, the woman, inherited her mother's grace with a good deal of her father's gaiety, though restrained, in her, behind the frontiers of decorum. She was delightful to behold, she was young, and she looked as if she were determined to remain young for ever; she was witty; she had a good heart and a sound head.

François found it buzzed about in Saumur that many men there, if not all men there, were in love with her, and that the very king, René the affable, wooed her *par-amours,* but that the girl was all discretion and would have none of him. François was eager to see her, for in spite of his youth, and though he still, to use his own phrase, wore his girdle, he had an eye and an inclination for the fair and considered himself as good a judge of their beauties as was ever the Trojan shepherd.

The first time François saw this nonpareil his heart came hopping into his mouth, for it seemed to him that he was looking upon the face of his old playmate Huguette. For a

moment he held his breath and questioned, could this indeed be she. Here were the same lively eyes, the same sunny tresses, the same sweet imperious mouth. Almost he cried her name aloud there from his place in the press of men, and then reason laid her finger on his lips. The lady Ambroise de Loré was at least as much older than François as the lost Huguette was younger. So he surrendered his fancy with a sigh, and felt a strange envy of his master, to whom it was permitted to woo this wonder. It was clear to François that here was a heart's desire that a man might not easily count on gratifying. For the lady Ambroise de Loré moved through the golden air of Saumur like a goddess girdled by adoring gods. Her escort was a very army of gentlemen of all ages, degrees and fortunes, but all reduced to a common equality by their passion.

It was unfortunate for Messire Robert d'Estouteville that nature had not been pleased to make him a ladies' man. He was inclined to stand or sit silent in their presence, and generally proved clumsy in the turning of a compliment. But the chief obstacle to his suit was the fact that he had for his main rival a certain noble of the noblest of Anjou, the Sire de Beauvau. In strength, in wealth, in honour, in fame, this lord of Beauvau was the honourable peer of Robert d'Estouteville. But the lord of Beauvau was glib of speech, quick of compliment, and was, moreover, a poet of distinction in a court where every man piqued himself on being a poet of some kind or another. Indeed, the Sire d'Estouteville was heavily handicapped with such a rival.

On the second day at Saumur, François chanced to be alone with Messire Robert, whose armour he was burnishing for the coming tournament. Though the greedy page had recovered his stomach, he had not regained favour, and was forced to play second fiddle. Master François was raw to the business. He had to learn laboriously the art of arming a knight, of having the different pieces of metal aptly ready, of knowing exactly how to adjust and buckle. But François was as nimble with his fingers as his wits, and he had a power of comprehending swiftly

and suddenly an unfamiliar summons to do that or this which he had never done in his life before, that made him amazingly welcome to a man like Messire Robert, whose mental processes were inclined to be sluggish if his bodily movements were notably active.

François was well pleased to think he was not cribbed in the company of his excellent uncle and of his excellent uncle's kinsman; he was better pleased to believe he knew what was the true cause of his new master's dumps. So when he had made an end of polishing up the armour—and all the while Messire Robert sat as mute as a fish and as glum as a vulture—young François made bold to rise from his place and to stand in respectful contemplation before his master.

"Boy," said the big, melancholic gentleman, "why do you stare at me?"

François knew that he was well enough in favour to dare to be pert.

"There is an old saying," he averred, "that a cat may look at a king."

"That is very true," Messire Robert agreed; "but then I am not a king."

"Nor am I a cat," answered François; "but my mother told me a fairy-tale once in which a cat did many a good service to his master. Wherefore I wish that I were a cat."

"And wherefore do you wish to be a cat?" asked the knight, who was not at all imaginative.

"Because," responded François, "in that case you would be more like to accept my service."

"Why, what service could you render me?" Robert questioned, "and of what service do you think I stand in need?"

"My dear lord," François said, "I grieve to note how of late you have fallen into a sadness."

"Out of which you cannot help me," sighed Messire Robert.

"Pardon me, dear lord," François urged, "if I make so bold as to contradict you and to assert roundly that I can and will ease you in this matter, if you will but give me leave."

Messire Robert stared at the small person who stood so jauntily before him. So might the lion of the fable have stared at the solicitous mouse.

"Why, you do not even know what troubles me," he complained. "And it is a matter of which I have not the heart to speak."

"I know very well," François asserted, "that your heart is sore for the sake of a certain lovely lady."

Messire Robert gaped at him with rounded eyes.

"How in the name of heaven do you know that?" he cried. Then with a sudden anger he continued: "Has anyone been tattling, has anyone been babbling, have you been chaffering with gossips?"

"I ask your patience, dear lord," François protested. "I am never a one to gossip and tattle and fetch and carry light reports."

This was not in the least true, for no one was more fond of chaffer and chatter than the lad; but for the moment he had a profound and most virtuous belief in his own statement.

"But I have my wits about me," he protested, "and where my affection is concerned, where my gratitude is awakened"—here he made his patron a profound reverence—"then my senses are more than usual lively. I have seen you change colour at the sight of a certain lady; I have heard you sigh as she passed by. One does not need to be a wizard to put two and two together and make four of it."

Robert d'Estouteville, being lovesick, was as ready for sympathy as a ripe boil is ready for the knife. So instead of extending a massive foot and kicking impudence into the middle of next week, he allowed his countenance to lighten a little, much to the relief of somewhat apprehensive impudence.

"Why, you imp of sin," he said—but said it friendly—"does a spirit of divination dwell in your small body?"

François always resented allusions to his stature. He never could reconcile himself to the discrepancy between his own picture of his person—a commanding, swaggering

fellow—and the dull accuracy of a mirror. Now he kept his resentment discreetly to himself and saluted his master profoundly.

"It certainly is God's golden truth," Messire Robert admitted, "that my heart's desire is for a certain lady; and, indeed, I am very unhappy in the matter, little pigmykin, for I do not think that I stand to gain that sweet lady's favour."

Here Messire Robert sighed so heavily that the room shook, and he looked so dismal that François was hard put to it to keep from laughing. But he addressed his lord with a grave face.

"My dear lord," he said, "I am only a simple lad"—he was now buoyantly afloat on the high tide of fancy and enjoying himself amazingly—"but I believe that fair ladies are as easily tempted by some verses in their honour as a canary is by groundsel."

François said this with a purpose. All the world knew that Messire de Beauvau was skilled in the art of making verses. It was for this reason that Messire Robert wagged his head very dolefully; for though he counted himself as good a man-at-arms as the Sire de Beauvau, he knew that he himself was, in truth, no scholar, and could write rhymes in praise of ladies with as much ease and facility as a bull.

"Alas! fond lad," he wailed between sighs, "I command none of those pitiful tricks that please ladies in bower. I cannot thrum, I cannot hum. I should be hard put to it to find a rhyme for 'love' if you asked me point-blank."

"My dear lord," François murmured deferentially, "Providence sometimes permits the humble to do a good turn to the proud. The writing of rhymes is no part of a great nobleman's business"—here Villon sniffed disdainfully at a non-present Sire de Beauvau—"any more than it is his business to concern himself with the shaping of sweetmeats, although ladies have as sweet an ear for the one as they have a sweet tooth for the other. But if a great lord desires to soothe a lady's stomach, he goes to those that make sweetmeats and buys of their wares. So, in like case, if

he desire to flatter a lady's vanity, he goes to those that write rhymes."

Messire Robert stared at the boy for a while in amazement.

"Where," he questioned wistfully, "in all this topsy-turvy town of Saumur can I hope to find such a cunning clerk who would be at once compliant and secret?"

Lad François saw with satisfaction that he had landed his big fish. He tapped himself on the chest and made a droll little bow.

"If your lordship," he said, "would allow me to make the experiment, I believe that I could do as neat a copy of love-verses as a delicate lady might desire."

"Do you mean to tell me," Messire Robert thundered, "that you can make verses?"

"I can turn verses as well as another," Villon responded cheerfully, "and if you will give me leave, I will bring you by this time to-morrow a rhyme in praise of your lady that will pleasure her and profit you."

Messire Robert had not a moment's hesitation about accepting the paternity of Villon's verses. If the lad could do as he said he would reward him handsomely, he swore.

"Trust me," François replied. "You shall have your rhymes to-morrow, and if they do not content you, why, I shall never ask leave to kiss your hand again."

It was on this understanding that the big man and the little lad parted company, in a very friendly spirit, for a period of four-and-twenty hours.

CHAPTER IX

THE GO-BETWEEN

IF François spoke so eagerly of his scheme, it was one word for his master and two for himself. Ever since he had seen Ambroise her likeness to his childhood's playmate had haunted him, filling him with a longing to be near her, to speak with her. In this service to his master, he discovered his opportunity, and was bold to make the most of it. Clearly the first thing to do was to shape the promised verses. This seemed an easy task to François. His head was a treasure-house of old songs; he had a nimble wit and hundreds of rhymes at his finger-tips. He mused under a shady tree in a sunny meadow.

"How were it best," he reflected, "for my lord to woo this lady? The verses must be as full of love as a sausage is full of sausage-meat, and yet they must be the verses of a straightforward gentleman, and not of a minstrel by profession. This is to my advantage and will pardon my stumbles."

On further consideration he decided that it would be an engaging compliment to combine with his amorous declaration an acrostic on the lady's name. Such toys were vastly popular because of the ingenuity their difficulty demanded. François had decided to make the ballade form his vehicle, because it was the favourite form of his favourite poets, and the form with which he was most familiar. Now a ballade has twenty-eight lines and the lady's name only fourteen letters. This decided him to repeat it twice. François began to weave his words on the shuttle of his mind, until after a deal of labour he had to his satisfaction composed these verses:

"As the gerfalcon at the point of day,
Moved by delight in glory after gloom,
Breathes the clean morning and with spirit gay
Rejoins his partner with uplifted plume:
O dear my lady, whom the saints illume,
I hasten so thy goodliness to near;
Seeing that Love had woven in his loom,
'Even to this end are we together here.'

"Dame of my heart, with none to say you nay,
Ever remain, till death my dust consume,
Laurel to crown me coming from the fray,
Olive to bless me with its peaceful bloom.
Reason will not allow me to make room
Even for one thought save service to my dear,
And while I live I ever am thy groom:
Marry, to this end are we together here.

"Believe me, sweet, whatever sorrows sway
Rudely my spirit, flung from Fortune's womb,
One gracious smile could brush my woes away
In such a wise as autumn's windy broom
Sweeps off dead leaves that hide a knightly tomb,
Exposing arms and making scripture clear.
Dear, I am yours until the Day of Doom:
Even to this end are we together here.

ENVOI.

"Lady, give hearing when my lips presume,
Offering my heart with all my goods and gear;
Refresh my fire before it ends in fume;
Even to this end are we together here."

Having polished and filed his verses to his own satisfaction, and to the admiration of his master, the next business of François was to bring them before the eyes of the lady. It was no easy matter to compass speech alone with the lady Ambroise, for she was by no means of a solitary disposition, but was almost always circled by a company of friends. Although François was, in a sense, the page of Messire Robert, he was only a page on sufferance, as it were, one that was not of gentle blood and might not push his way where he would. But at that time François was rich in those two qualities, patience and perseverance, which it is proverbially asserted will carry a snail from Paris to

Jerusalem. Wherefore he bided his time without wasting his time, and pursued his purpose like a hunting-dog with his nose to the ground.

The lady Ambroise de Loré lodged in a great mansion, with a garden that ran down to the river, and was separated from the stream and the stream-path by a high wall. François, insidiously ingratiating himself with varlets, learned that it was the custom of the lady Ambroise to walk sometimes in this garden of a morning.

A wall is no great matter to a lad-rascal of Paris, that can climb with his eyelids, and would peril his neck merrily for a munch at a green apple. So behold François very shortly astride of that same river wall and looking into a very commendable garden of flowers and fruit trees and pleasant walks. Along one of these pleasant walks, as luck would have it, there came very soon the lady Ambroise de Loré, walking alone and enjoying the fresh of the morning.

The moment he saw her François swung himself over the wall into the garden, so swiftly and briskly that he found himself on his hands and knees behind a bush without having attracted the attention of the young lady. So he rose gingerly, dusted himself, and then emerging from his shelter, stepped forward as bold as you please towards the lady Ambroise. Before Ambroise had time to feel or express surprise at his presence, he made her a courtly bow, and with a rich extravagance of vocabulary, craved permission to address her. The young lady stared at the small, lean, dark-favoured youth in the bright clothes who carried himself so dapperly. As he continued to smile up at her with unconquerable self-possession, she took it for granted that his presence there was justifiable and bade him deliver his message.

Seeing her thus near, François knew her to be even lovelier than he had already believed. For all her slimness she was suavely rounded where roundness was essential, girlish and not boyish in her youthful litheness. François knew that if her garments were now to evaporate, she would seem such a nymph of Diana as he had once seen in

a tapestry, white and finely symmetrical. Her hair was gold and her eyes were grey-blue, and they made him think of a deep river. Her cheeks were dappled with delicious carnations; her hands were not small, but they were nobly shaped and kept; her feet—the feet of a nymph—were of a right fellowship with her hands. Her mouth was a lively red, her teeth small and white, and there was a dimple in her chin that promised much. As for her voice, it was clear and sweet as it summoned him to speak his errand.

Instantly François dropped upon his knees, and plucking forth his parchment, he presented it to her.

"I tender this," he said, "to the grace of your white hands on behalf of my dear lord and master."

Naturally Ambroise asked who that master might be, but François only shook his head, while at the same time he continued to urge the parchment into her fingers. Seeing him so resolved, Ambroise took the scroll and unrolling it, began to read, at first with surprise, but thereafter with evident pleasure.

"Here," she said, when she had made a finish, "is a very comely ballade, breathing a commendable spirit. Who has woven these words so finely?"

François' wits, busy with the spell of the girl's beauty, felt a wild longing to answer her question by telling the truth and declaring himself her minstrel. But to do this would needs sever abruptly his relations with Robert d'Estouteville, deprive him of all chance of those gifts he coveted, and besides cancelling the confidence and goodwill of the knight, lead his skin into very present pains and penalties. For the lord Robert had a heavy hand when justly angered. Villon had seen him drubbing the greedy page and shivered to think of it.

"These verses, fair lady," he answered, "are the loving work of my dear and honoured lord, Messire Robert d'Estouteville. They are, as it were, the beatings of his honest heart."

Ambroise opened her beautiful eyes very wide indeed on the enchanted youth.

"You surprise me not a little," she admitted. "I know, as who does not, that Messire d'Estouteville is a gallant fighting man; but I had never thought of him as a writer of rhymes."

"Indeed," François assured her, "they are the well-begotten children of my lord's mother-wit, that he called into the world to plead for him."

He was surprised as he spoke to find himself so fretted by his falsehood.

But the girl was far too much interested in the verses and in the astonishing discovery that Messire Robert d'Estouteville aspired to the laurels, to pay any attention to the agitation of the lad. So she read the verses over again with a look of increased pleasure in the renewed acquaintance. François, regarding her, wished that fortune had made him a limner, so that he could have painted her as she stood there in her gown of blue all powdered with gold, herself the fairest flower of the fair garden.

When Ambroise concluded the Envoi for the second time, she looked from the parchment to the lad, and because he was such an alert youth, and a kind of carrier-cupid for sweet phrases, she swung him a smile that made his senses swim.

"If these be indeed Messire Robert's rhymes," she said softly, "are you very sure that they are intended for me?"

"I am very sure," François asserted, "for my lord bade me deliver them to the loveliest lady in France."

"Nay," Ambroise protested, "there be ladies in Saumur alone to whom such words would apply more fitly." And here she named over very briskly some half a dozen ladies that were by no means of the most fair.

"Lady," protested François, "I do but ask you to look at the first letter of each line of the first octave of my lord's ballade, and tell me what you make of them."

The girl scanned the parchment again, naming the initial letter of each line of the first verse in its order as she was bade, as thus:

A, M, B, R, O, I, S, E, and as she read and guessed their secret her cheeks flew a livelier red.

François was not over pleased to find that Ambroise seemed more taken by this trick of acrostic than by the melody of the verses, but he laboured the artifice.

"I do not think," he said pertly, "that there is another lady in all Saumur that carries your Christian name; but for the fear that there might be such an one, I charge you to read a little further and scan the first six lines of the second octave."

Pleasingly pink, Ambroise did as the lad directed, reading aloud the initial letters, which ran thus—D, E, L, O, R, E.

"Why," she cried delightedly, "here is indeed the whole of my name. Truly, your master is a man of rare wit."

"Do but read on," François insisted, "and you will find the like to happen again."

Ambroise obeying, found that indeed her name repeated itself along the remaining lines of the ballade.

"This is a most pretty ingeniousness," she vowed, "and I would he were here that I might tell him as much."

François made her a reverence.

"I will carry," he said, "your message to my lord. But I would, for his sake, be trusted with some words of warmer significance."

The cheeks of the maid were by this time as red as a boiled crayfish.

"You are small of size," she declared—François resented this hotly—"but you are a giant of impudence. Do you think because a gentleman is at pains to send me verses I must straight away hop into his arms? No such matter. Do you think that I have lived all these years"—she had sniffed some seventeen summers—"without having had a budget of rhymes flung at my feet?"

Now Ambroise was in reality delighted to learn that the big knight had turned troubadour for her sake, but she was not willing to admit as much to his envoy. Wherefore her eyes flashed and her voice challenged, and the nonchalance of François was rattled, and he gave at the knees mentally as well as physically, for he was yet unfamiliar with women.

"Indeed," he pleaded, "I meant no offence. I only wished well to my lord on his suit."

The false anger of Ambroise flickered out in a minute.

"You may tell your lord," she said, with a dainty gravity, "that I prize his gift very highly. More than this I cannot say for the moment, save to give him my happy thanks."

François, thinking that he had got his dismissal, made to take his leave. But Ambroise arrested him.

"Stay," she commanded, "you are an ambassador and must have a reward."

She sought for her purse and found it not, for it was within, and then she fumbled at her rings, aiming to pluck one off. But François prevented her, being suddenly fired with a great resolve.

"Sweet lady," he began, with a hesitation that was not familiar to him, "my service is due to my master and rewarded in the doing. But if indeed you think that I merit some small alms, why then there is a favour for which I would pray if I dared."

Maybe Ambroise knew what we would be at.

"Nay, young sir," she answered gaily, "you have pleased me too much for me to chaffer about your guerdon. It is ask and have I promise you."

"I have read somewhere," François faltered, "that it sometimes pleases a beautiful princess to deign a kiss."

The girl was as chaste and decorous as you please, but she had not lived her seventeen years without changing a kiss or two with more serious kissers than Messire d'Estouteville's page.

Before the boy was well aware of it, her soft hands rested on his shoulders and her soft mouth pressed lightly against his own. It was all the work of one sweet second, but it seemed to change the world for François. The earth reeled beneath his feet; all the blood in his body thundered to his head; his limbs shook with uncontrollable tremors; his eyes were veiled, his ears drummed, and the palms of his hands were wet. He had not known what he asked for, like the girl in the fable who sought to see Jove in all his

splendours and terrors, and, like the girl in the fable, he seemed to perish through the divine consent.

The girl, who saw his embarrassment but did not understand it, asked him if he would like to go with her through the house, and so out to his lord, instead of returning by the more difficult way of the wall by which he had come.

François parted from the lady he scarce knew how, and he staggered on the road as if he were drunk, as indeed he was, but with a deadlier vintage than wine. Before he had turned his back, the lady Ambroise had forgotten his existence and was racing back to her bower to read again the ballade that François had composed, and that she took for the brain-baby of Messire d'Estouteville. She sat for a great while very thoughtful, with her chin in the cup of her hand, while in fancy a number of gallant gentlemen galloped before her eyes. And gradually their company dwindled and minished until only two knights were left of all their number, and one was the lord of Beauvau and the other was the lord of Estouteville.

CHAPTER X

SHADOW

TO François, swimming in the éther, there were but two black clouds on that summer sky of Saumur, and they were colleagued. The first of these allegorical clouds was the residence of his good uncle's kinsman; the second was one of its inhabitants. Guillaume Villon's relation, whose being was the cause of the Canon's visit to Anjou, and therefore of François his visit, lived in what seemed to the lad to be a dull house on the outskirts of the town. It was just an honest, commonplace canonage, with an honest Canon for its master, and to François, who was all on fire with the delight and excitement of his holiday life, the visits he was compelled to pay to it in his uncle's company would in any case have remained a grey memory. It did not interest him, then, to know that the cleric possessed a considerable quantity of valuable plate; that he was believed to have large sums of money snugly stowed away; and that he was for his station as well-to-do a man as could be found under the canopy of King René's rule. It did not interest him, then or thereafter, to learn that the Canon was an authority on the early Fathers of the Church, and possessed a fine library of their writings.

But the Canon of St. Benoît was an impassioned patriologist, who liked nothing better than to sit with his old kinsman and crony over a table piled with folios and enlivened with flagons, and to discuss abstruse and recondite points of theology, whose aridity was plenteously moistened by libations of kind wine. For if the Anjou cleric had a library he had also a cellar where generous juices, colour of amber or colour of ruby, lay prisoners in wood

or in glass, awaiting liberation. François was to remember with amusement in after-times the picture of those two old churchmen drinking horn after horn as gaily as if they had been young reprobates, and all the while discussing between their cups portentous problems of divinity which seemed to François no other and no better than a precious waste of time. But while he was abiding in Saumur he found small entertainment from the meetings of the ecclesiastics, and this for a good and sufficient reason.

François did not make the acquaintance of the Angevin Canon for some little time after his arrival in Saumur, on account of his attendance on Messire d'Estouteville. But when the greedy page's distemper was wholly mended François had won promotion as the secret pet of his lord, and his wooings of the muse afforded him leisure hours for meditation. One of these hours Canon Guillaume, who of course knew nothing of the rhyming business, took control of for the purpose of bringing his nephew and his friend acquainted.

The first time that ever François came into the house, in his uncle's company, they found the good man at his table in an oaken room that was dark in despite of the summer, because of its small windows and the many trees in the orchard without. And the good man greeted them gladly, and bade them sit, and questioned Guillaume as to his young companion, and nodded his head sagely over the story.

"It is good," he said slowly, and it seemed to François even sadly, "for us elders to have youth about us, and jollity to cheer our spirits and sweeten our pilgrimage. Better is it than wisdom, better than wealth."

Even as he spoke he fetched a sigh or two, and François could have found it in his heart to pity him, were it not that his thoughts were distracted elsewhere, and that there was no room for pity in his fear. For straightway behind the good man, in the gloom of the chamber, François was suddenly aware of a pair of eyes that seemed at first to have no face about them, but to grow and glow in the dark, and these eyes were fixed upon him with a great steadfastness, and, as the lad deemed, with great malevolence,

and he shuddered as he saw and felt like one in a nightmare, who would fain cry out and rid himself of his fear, but cannot for all his longing.

But even as he stared and gaped with a heart of water, the good man called out in a loud voice:

"Have we no cheer to set before our guests to show them proof of their welcome. Bestir thee, Philippe, and give order for their entertainment and ours."

Then François, his dread somewhat lightened by the sound of the human voice, was aware that the eyes, though they still seemed evil to him, did not indeed glare at him out of nothingness, but were set in a living face that topped a living body, which was hunched there in a settle in the dusk of the room. And at the sound of the host's voice a man rose from the settle and came forward, and François saw that he was a young man, some three or four, or may be five years older than himself. He was habited all in black, and many inches greater in stature than François, and he had a smooth, sallow face that seemed as changeless as a stagnant pool; but the eyes were set in that flat mask of face still seemed frightful to François now that he could see them plainly in the clearer twilight of the middle room. They gleamed with a dark brightness, making François think of black flame; and they seemed to him hungry eyes, and cruel eyes, and watchful and full of desires.

Guillaume Villon nodded amiable greeting to the youth, with whom he was familiar from previous visits and in whom he saw nothing of the uncanniness that so perturbed François.

The youth spoke no word, but saluted Canon Guillaume and passed from the room. François, unconsciously shrinking a little as he came near him, on account of his late alarm, noted that he moved very swiftly and noiselessly, and the way of his gait made François think of a wolf, and then of the wolves of his early memory that he had taken to be cats. In a little while the youth came back again as quickly and as quietly as he had gone out, and he was speedily followed by a woman who was the good man's

housekeeper, and she bore a tray that was laden with wine and cups and cakes and sweetmeats of many kinds, and she set it down on the table and made a reverence and went away. Then the good man filled four glasses with a wine that had the colour and almost the sweetness of honey, and gave one to each of the company and lifted his own and spoke:

"Health and happiness, and the grace of Heaven to all present, and, above all, the grace of Heaven, for without it there is neither happiness nor health."

Canon Guillaume nodded approval as he drank, and the good man's face was kindly as he lifted his glass; but while the countenance of the man in black at the back stayed unchanged, it seemed to Villon as if his eyes mocked while he emptied his glass stealthily.

After a little while the good man said to his kinsman from Paris:

"Gossip Guillaume, it is but natural that we elders should have much to talk of that is but tedious for young ears. Therefore, while we chatter do thou, Philippe"—and he turned to where the youth in black sat—"take this nephew of our guest into the garden and divert him for a little while, as youth best knows how to divert youth."

As silent as before Philippe rose to his feet, and François thought, as he looked at him, that he had never seen any young thing that looked less youthful. Also, he was conscious of so fierce a reluctance to accompany the fellow that he found it hard to restrain an entreaty that he might be suffered to abide where he was. But he dared not do this for shame's sake, partly, and partly from fear of those strange eyes that seemed to read his mind and deride him. So he rose very loath and followed Philippe out of doors and into the garden, and as he went his hand unconsciously slipped to the handle of the little dagger that Messire d'Estouteville had given him, such as pages were wont to wear, and then he quitted it again with a sudden chill, for it seemed to him that those baleful eyes were upon him still, though his guide's back was turned. So they came into the garden, and Philippe led the way across the

grass till they were out of earshot of the house. Then he suddenly spun round on his heel and faced François.

"I have seen you before," he said, and his voice was as expressionless as his face; but the staring darkness of the eyes seemed to give the missing tone to the words as it seemed to give the missing movement to the features.

There came over François a creepy impression that he had been spied upon by those hostile eyes for an infinity of time; that while he went hither and thither unawares they had always been watching him, watching him. The more he thought of this man, the more he looked on him, the more he disliked him. He seemed to make an ugly smear of black across the soft greenness of the garden. He seemed to drive a chill across the heated air. But François felt sure it were politic to mask his antipathy.

"Have you so?" he answered, squeezing as much heartiness as he could into his voice. "And where then, if it please you?"

"It did not please me," Philippe answered in the same colourless utterance. "I do not care for butterflies unless I can stick them with a pin. Their gay colours and their silly flutterings offend me."

"Do you mean me for a butterfly?" François asked as pleasantly as might be. He did not wish to take offence, for this fellow was his senior, and surely stronger, and alarming apart from his strength. Besides, he did not resent being likened to a butterfly, for he was more than proud of his bright raiment.

"Surely," the fellow in black answered, "every pert ass of a page is; and because he flutters round a rosetree he thinks he is near to the rose."

The face of François flushed, for it would seem as if Philippe were striking a stroke at his service to the lady Ambroise, and he wished to deal him a buffet. But it seemed wiser to carry it off.

"The rose is the queen of flowers," he said carelessly. Then something spurred him and he went on: "It is better to be the butterfly that rejoices in the colour and odour of the rose than the worm that gnaws at its root."

As he spoke these words he was prepared for all attack from the other, and his sinews were nimble for retreat. But the black fellow moved not, and the slab of his face was as smooth as before, and his voice when he spoke, which he did pretty soon, was as toneless.

"A worm is a worm," he said, "and also it is a snake, that can sting and coil and crush, and also it is a dragon, all winged and glittering in tinted scales, that can snatch away fair princesses to its cave."

He had never ceased to stare at François, but now as he spoke his gaze seemed more penetrating than before.

"Dragons come to grief in the fairy stories," François said stoutly. Philippe nodded.

"Aye," he said, "in the stories, but not in real life."

There was silence for a little space in that garden. It seemed to François as if this Philippe fixed him deliberately with the malignancy of his black eyes to terrorize him, and François swore to himself that he would not be terrorized, though in his heart he was not very confident that he could keep his oath. But he stiffened himself to stare back at the starer, and kept his lids aloft and his face set long enough to make the man in black abandon the challenge. Reaching out a lean, sinewy hand, whiskered with black hairs, he plucked hold of the right hand of François where it hung idly by his side. François, taken unawares and thinking this to be some attack, stiffened to resistance; but Philippe, uttering sounds that might be taken for amiable laughter, shook his head.

"What frightens you?" he asked, and before François could lift to his lips the lie of the word "Nothing" he sped on: "I would but look on the book of your hand. Has your hand ever been read?"

François, understanding now what he would be at, suffered his wrist to remain in the grip of Philippe, while he shook his head in response to Philippe's question.

"I know something of that gipsy business," Philippe said, "and because I think you and I are like to have commerce I would wish for a peep at your fortunes."

Holding the hand of François palm upwards, he stooped

his meaningless face over it, while his left hand speculatively caressed his chin. To François, he knew not why, it seemed as if the world stood still, as if all sound had ceased in that little garden; as if the great clock of time forbore to tick. After what seemed an age-long period Philippe lifted his level face and his sombre eyes brooded over François.

"You have a damnable bad hand," he said; but it seemed to François as if, though he strove to say it exultantly, he did in fact speak with a lingering, hidden virulence that smacked more of resentment than of rejoicing. "You will live an idle life; you will fail in your endeavours; you will make a bad end."

So, as he spoke, he flung the hand of François away from him so sharply, that it struck the boy's thigh in the swing with a force that made it tingle. That and the look of hate in Philippe's eyes, pricked François to a spirit of indignation.

"My life is for me to shape," he cried angrily, "under God's good leadership, and it is not for your yea or nay to change it for worse or for better."

Philippe laughed at the youth's anger. That is to say, he parted his lips and gave forth an emission of breath. But there was no sign of what mortals call mirth on the monumental dullness of his face. Such as his merriment was it seemed to François markedly more unpleasant than his direct malevolence.

"Fie!" Philippe cried, "what a hot heart the bird of paradise carries under his fine feathers. Fly your ways, bright bird, heedless of gin and lime and glitter of glass and spread of net. But when you are in the toils, when finger and thumb are meeting to wring your neck, do not forget that your trouble was foretold."

François found the fellow so hateful, with the awful smoothness of his face and the awful smoothness of his voice and the horrid character of his words, that he would have given all his few possessions for strength to justify a leap at the prophet's throat and the overbearing him to the earth. But he forced himself to speak and to answer stoutly:

"Any fool may predict what he pleases, but the wise man makes his own fulfilment."

Philippe shrugged his shoulders.

"It is not my fault," he said as evenly as ever, "if you carry an unlucky hand," and as he spoke it seemed to François as if something like a grin wrinkled for a moment that standing water on the man's face. From the distant house came sound of a summoning voice. "I think we are called for," Philippe said, as levelly as if nothing of moment had been spoken between him and his companion.

As he spoke he began to walk slowly towards the house, and François had no choice but to keep him company. He would have wished to make the return in silence, for he had scant relish for the conversation of his dislikable companion; but Philippe, it seemed, was not of a taciturn mood. Though he kept a little ahead of François he continued to speak, not indeed over his shoulder, but straight ahead, as if his reluctant companion were in front of him instead of lagging angrily behind.

"I tell you, my tinsel friend," he said, "there be ugly things lying in wait for you. The shadow of the gallows blackens that pink palm of yours. If you come to be hanged, may I be there to see the sport." He chuckled as he said this, but his chuckling had no music of human mirth about it. It made François think of the wind whistling among graves in some God's-acre where only madmen and murderers and self-slayers were buried. But he did not know what to say to such speeches; they seemed to freeze the native readiness of his wit, and he could find no retort to make that seemed worth the saying. So he jogged along in silence until they came to the house, and he was heartily glad to quit it a few minutes later in the company of honest Uncle Guillaume.

"Uncle," said François, when he and Guillaume Villon had quitted the house and were on the way to the dwelling of yet another relative, the good citizen with whom they lodged, "uncle, who is that youth whose acquaintance I have just made?"

"I do not rightly know," answered the Canon. "There is

some guess-tale behind it, bastardy and suicide, I know not what. I have judged it best not to inquire, and you will do well to follow my example. All I know is that his name is Philippe Sermois, and that our good friend has taken him into his house and supports him out of Christian charity. He teaches the youth, too, and hopes to make a good priest of him."

François reflected that the Church did not seem likely to have cause to rejoice over such a son and servant. But if he asked no more questions about Philippe Sermois, he could not dismiss him from his thoughts. François knew something of sleeplessness that night, for the face of Philippe Sermois haunted him, hideously interfering with his easy dreams, and the ugly words that Philippe Sermois had uttered buzzed insistingly in his ears. With the fury of the puny, François longed for such a strength as that which lodged in the body of Messire Robert. How good it would be to strike at that white, malign face, to hammer that black antagonist to his knees, to silence his jeers and sneers in a violent triumph. But François knew, with the bitterness of surety, that were he to attempt such an adventure he would only come to unbearable grief and shame. This infamous Philippe was twice as strong as he; could snap him across his knee as folk snap a dry twig; could cudgel him into a mere huddle of suffering skin and bones; could kill him, if this pleased him, as a dog could kill a rat. He sobbed dry-eyed at the thought.

There were moments when little Villon permitted his critical wit to assert that Messire Robert d'Estouteville, for all his rank and all his valour, was, as far as the brain part of him was concerned, little better than a stupid fellow. François could write with ease rhymes to delight the divine Ambroise, that Messire Robert could not distantly imitate if he were offered the choice of doing so or losing his head. But Messire Robert had the stout heart and the strong body which made men respect him and women desire him. At no time of his life, Villon felt very sure, would Robert d'Estouteville have been so taunted as François had that day been taunted, and let the foul words go by unbuffeted,

though the speaker were his senior and had thrice his strength. There lay the pride of the fighting man, compared to which the pride of the thinking man seemed so infinitely little and pitiable. He wailed in the darkness as he asked himself what he could do if he were called on to defend Ambroise de Loré from danger. He knew at least, and rejoiced in the knowledge, that he would do his best; but he knew also, and the knowledge rotted his conscience, that his best would be no better than the interference of a lap-dog between a tiger and his prey. What price were his rhymes worth, were they the best that ever poet tinkled and jingled, when offered in the market of mankind against the giant strength of a fighting man? Villon came near to dissolving in tears over these grim considerations, until his natural sense reminded him that if the thing were so, snivelling would not better it. Who can add a cubit to his stature, he whispered to himself, as he rolled on his side, to fall asleep and dream evil dreams peopled with many representations of Philippe Sermois.

When he woke he hoped that he should not meet him again—and hoped in vain.

CHAPTER XI

OLD FRIENDS

ROBERT D'ESTOUTEVILLE was hugely delighted at the success of his envoy. He had no thought of self-reproach at the imposition that he and his little friend practised upon Ambroise de Loré. To the soldier such toys as went by the name of verses were of no more account than any pretty piece of goldsmith's work which it might please him to offer to a fair lady. It is true that in the case of the trinket Messire Robert would never have dreamed of passing it off as his own handiwork. But gentlemen did sometimes write verses. Was there not the illustrious and unfortunate Prince Charles, Duke of Orleans, who not only made his Castle of Blois a very cote of cooing doves, but was graciously pleased to run his august thoughts into rhyme and metre. In truth, Messire Robert had been a little inclined to scorn his Grace of Orleans, for this weakness of his, setting it down to some enfeeblement due to his lengthy captivity in England. But to-day Messire Robert thought better of poetry as an occupation for gentlefolk, since it had won him kinder thoughts from Ambroise de Loré than ever he had been able to compass before.

So having once tasted of Hippocrene—though, indeed, only by proxy—the good knight was fain to return to those refreshing waters. François was called upon to stir his wits for rhymes, and his toes in frequent embassies to the beautiful Ambroise, who always received him graciously, giving him a kiss for every ballade rondel or rondeau that he slipped into her white fingers. And with each proof of Messire Robert's passion the fair lady's

esteem for her stalwart suitor increased, and her former regard for the lord of Beauvau suffered a proportionate diminution. But on those few occasions when she had speech of Messire Robert—for the great knight was as shy in his proper person as he was bold through the mouth of another—she was always not a little disappointed to find that his spoken prose seemed to bear no kind of relationship to his written verse. On these occasions Messire de Beauvau rose afresh in her estimation, for Messire de Beauvau was not merely a very neat turner of rhymes, but he was an excellent good talker. So the lovely maid was sorely perturbed between her two principal lovers, and could not force her fluctuating mind to a definite decision. At last she could think of no better solution than to leave the problem to the arbitrament of arms, and she somehow contrived to let her brace of wooers understand that whichever was victor in the great tournament that was about to take place, might confidently aspire to the favour of her hand.

But while Messire Robert d'Estouteville was sucking vicariously long draughts from the stream of the Muses, the interpreter of his passion was drinking deep from a more dangerous fountain. Poor François was all afire with the madness of calf-love. Ever since Ambroise de Loré had kissed him with such sweet carelessness on the lips, he had thought of nothing but her; had seen to no purpose anything but her beauty; had heard to no purpose anything but her voice. He was drunk with delight while he laboured at the verses in her praise; he filed and polished them, enriching them with every conceit he could recall from Eustace Deschamps and the "Romance of the Rose," and thinking himself astonishingly original all the while, as, indeed, he believed himself to be original in his infatuation. Nobody, he assured himself, had ever loved as he loved; nobody would ever so love again to the end of time. He welcomed every opportunity of appearing in the lady's presence, and trembled as he availed himself of it. He longed for the light kiss that she bestowed so lightly, and yet dreaded it for the way in which it shook and racked his spirit. It was all

a strange, delicious, bitter-sweet business; his mind was afire with dreams and ideals; there was no ugly stain upon his robe of romance. All he did was to live in a rapture; all he asked was now and then to be near her and touch her hand; all he hoped for was that some time in long years to come, when the world was ringing with his fame, he might then be free to speak and reveal how much he had accomplished for love's sake.

But for all his fantastical passion, François remained a very human lad, and though he pictured his heart as riddled with more arrows than were ever fired at Saint Sebastian, he was, in reality, enjoying his holiday hugely. Saumur was a jolly town in those days of carousal, and the lad had a good deal of liberty to share in its jollity. His squiring of Messire Robert was no onerous business, for the stout knight was a great sharer in the royal sports, pastimes and banquets. His uncle was heartily willing that François should amuse himself, for he regarded this jaunt to Saumur as the illuminated preface, as it were, to a studious and pious life, and he was naturally much gratified by the favour shown to the lad by my lord of Estouteville, who might prove a precious patron hereafter. He would scarcely have approved, indeed, if he had known of those verses that were, as who should say, the false money of the Muses. But he did not know and went his ways in peace of mind.

This same writing of rhymes did not serve to keep François within doors. He rhymed as he ran, in street or market-place, by stream or field, till all the world seemed to jingle verses. His chief delight was, of course, the sight of lady Ambroise, and he employed his liberty in frequenting such public places as promised to afford him a glimpse, if no more than a glimpse, of her loveliness. For though he saw her well-nigh daily when he served as his lord's Cupid, this did not content him, and he haunted her goings and comings with a fidelity of which the girl had no knowledge.

But if there had been no Ambroise de Loré in Saumur, the youth would have been scarce less active and eager

in seeing and hearing all there was to see and hear in the lively, lovely town. The world was his book and Saumur one of its fairest pages, and he rejoiced unrestrainedly in the colour and the bustle of it all. Here was a paradise after his own heart, brave with flags and hangings, loud with cheerful music, generous in good fare, quick with merry faces, pretty faces, brave faces. Villon loved to run hither and thither tasting all the gaieties. He went for the most part alone, for the fellowship of the pages had more duties and less leisure. But in so jovial a place it was impossible to feel lonely.

There was a fair space of meadowing on the other side of the river, where a temporary tilt-yard had been enclosed for the benefit of such knights as cared to exercise themselves and their horses in preparation for the coming jousts. Hard by a kind of petty fair had sprung into being, with tents and booths for eating and drinking and for the displays of jugglers and acrobats. Such a place was not likely to be patronized by the great ladies of the court, and there was little chance for François of seeing Ambroise de Loré in its alleys. It attracted him vastly for all that, with its noise, its variety and its junketings, but he felt that he owed it to his high passion to feign that there was a possibility of seeing his lady there, and that he caught at the faintest chance. To tell the truth, François would have gone to the fair in any case, for he dearly loved such kind of entertainment.

With a buoyant heart he plunged into the thick of the throng. He had money in poke, for my lord was most liberal, and he could treat himself to all the gilded gingerbread, honey-cake and the like, that his healthy appetite could desire. Also, he could visit all the wonders that were hidden in the strollers' tents, feast his gaze on the Fat Woman, the Bearded Lady, the Living Skeleton. He could gape at the ground and lofty tumblers, stare at the performing animals, applaud the bouts of fisticuffs between cautious giants, smile at the pretty girls on stilts who rattled tambourines over the heads of the people. Master François sipped thirstily at all these pleasures, squandering his

pocket-money with a reckless prodigality. He had nearly come to the end of his exchequer, and had seen, as it seemed, all that there was to see, when he suddenly became aware of a crowd that was gathering and swelling in another part of the meadow, and he could hear the sounds of a hoarse and powerful voice making some mountebank's proclamation.

If François' legs were by this time just a trifle weary with the pilgrimage of pleasure, his spirits were as brisk and fresh as ever, and he promptly set off in the direction of the new temptation. Quite a large crowd had already congregated, many circles of humanity around the central core of entertainment like the rings in the trunk of a tree. The gregariousness of François was tickled by the folk, but the well-spring of curiosity that bubbled ever in his bosom or his brain—he left the matter to the learned to decide—made him long with an exceeding great longing to know what was going on at the heart of the multitude. So he slipped into the midst of the press, and thereafter with patience and pushing, and plying of elbows, shoving vigorously here and insinuating gingerly there, he succeeded after an age-long while in getting to the goal, and finding himself, very hot and breathless, in the first row of spectators.

An open space of a few yards square was staked and roped, and guarded by a couple of rough-headed, hard-handed fellows in soiled raiment of parti-coloured cloth. In this open space a diversion was being provided for my Lord High Mightiness the mob. It seemed that some part of this diversion had just come to a conclusion amidst thundering of approval, for the ring was empty save for its shock-headed keepers, and for a great fellow that lolled at his ease before a little tent on such a seat as might have been copied from one of those curule chairs that rested the nethermosts of Roman senators.

This fellow was to ordinary speculation no other than the typical hulker of a travelling show at a country fair, habited in bedraggled finery that had passed through many hands and covered many backs before it came to the present

wearer. But he caught the eye, if not the taste, of François, instantly, and the lad studied him with a reluctant fascination that he found it difficult to explain.

Strange familiarities seemed to group themselves about that supine brute: old memories shut away in closets of the mind tapped and rattled at their doors to be set free. What, François asked himself, was that tawdry ruffian to him? And while he was asking himself that question, and failing wholly to find an answer, the flap of the tent was flung back and the little stage had a new player.

This was a girl, a young girl, probably younger than François, though in her precocious maturity she seemed older. She was scantily clad in a gaudy habit, that was neither altogether Zingaro nor altogether Moresco, but seemed to blend the extravagances of both fashions. She shot forth into the open space with a great capering and fluttering of her thin garments, ducked her salutations to the cardinal points, tilted herself aloft on pointed toes, blew kisses with great rapidity to so much of the world as she could boast for audience, and therewith began to dance, which it seemed was what was expected of her, both by the mass that concentrated around the ring, and by the swaggering patron that presided over the business. This fellow now picked up a lute that lay at his feet and began to thrum some sounds which he intended for a tune. This and the tambourine which the girl carried supplied the music for her dance.

From the moment that François got a clear view of the girl's face as distinct from the general impression of her youth, and her impudence and her tinted draperies, he was instantly aware of a strange tugging at the strings of his sensibility. For this jigging miss in her flaunting rig as she skipped so wantonly recalled to him another child of Eve, at first indefinitely, then tantalizingly, then with a sudden clearness of realized appreciation. This dancing child had an amazing, staggering likeness to that most incomparable of all fair maidens, the Lady Ambroise de Loré. The dancer, indeed, was probably a little younger, but she seemed to the full as mature, and her face had a

truly remarkable resemblance to the countenance that meant for François all the dreams and all the felicities. Thinking that he must be dreaming in full day, he deliberately shut his eyes, kept them shut while he faithfully counted a hundred, and then opened them again. In the interval the dancing-girl had floated somewhat nearer to the spot where he stood and he saw clearly that the resemblance which he had read was no fancy, but unquestionable fact. He admitted, indeed, that if by some strange whirligig of fortune the two women could be placed side by side, there need be no difficulty in telling them one from the other, even though they were habited alike. But seen apart, the resemblance might well perplex and mystify.

While François stared and gaped and wondered, the dance went on, a mad, wild naughtiness of a dance, that might perhaps claim Spain for its immediate origin, but that could for sure boast a history through the Moors to Greece and Egypt and Crete. The beholders, and François with them, did not care a curse where it came from; they were content that it had come and enjoyed it immensely. The girl danced with what seemed to be an exuberance of vitality, of those high animal spirits which will make a cat gambol madly by itself. A heedless spectator would have averred that she danced, in the main, just because she liked dancing, careless of the possible reward, or, rather, finding her reward in the wild pleasure of the thing that she was doing. But François, who was never at any time a heedless spectator of the game of life, saw otherwise; guessed at the haggard art behind the flaunting artlessness, and noted, not without understanding, the thin, wicked whip which the fellow that sprawled in the chair carried but half hidden up his loose sleeve.

Then in a flash memory spoke imperatively to François, clearing the riddle that puzzled him. This dancing-creature, that was permitted by Providence to resemble the Lady Ambroise—her identity was revealed, because he knew through her who it was that he had always striven dimly and unsuccessfully to decide that the lady Ambroise suggested to him. That great ruffian lolling there, with the lute

on his lap and the whip up his sleeve, was explained. He had seen him before with a sword; he linked him with images of blood and snow. In a word, this master mountebank was no other than the Burgundian soldier that had dwelt in their tenement in the days when François was a small child. Further and more important, the flaunting girl that skipped, as it were, to the mountebank's whistling, was his sweet little imperious she-playfellow of those ancient days—Huguette.

But if he knew the pair, it was plain that the pair had no knowledge of him, as, indeed, how could they? The girl jigged and twisted time and again close to the front row of spectators, among whom François had eeled his way, but her glance floated over him unheeding. The Burgundian, handing round a greasy bonnet for coppers, solicited and accepted the dole that François offered, but there was no gleam of recognition in his bloodshot eyes. How should he—how should she discover in him the ragged child of so many years ago? François, glittering in his peacock plumage, felt that he cut a very different figure, to be sure, and yet in his heart he was disappointed not to be recognized.

However, because he was not recognized that was not necessarily an end of the matter. François resolved that when the show was over he would call cousinship with the strollers and renew his youth. It is to be noted that François, being neck-deep in love, and very proud of his flashing knack of verses, was pleased to regard himself as quite an old, established man of the world, whereas, in truth, he might have been painted green, so strong upon him still was an infantile simplicity.

Once again the girl capered gaily, twisting her lithe body into all manner of provocative contortions, at each of which the crowd applauded thunderously. The girl herself seemed to take no notice of the plaudits, but continued to jig and twist as if she were serenely alone and skipping for her own edification. But the mottled face of the Burgundian flushed with gratification, and he fingered his sweaty bonnet feverishly, as if impatient to be proffering it again for the

favours of the crowd. Indeed, he was on his feet before the last steps of the girl's last dance had been tripped, and was busy soliciting from an audience that, once the pastime was over, was brisk in dissipating in pursuit of other sport.

CHAPTER XII

WAGER OF BATTLE

AS the crowd melted about him and the shock-heads were busy plucking up the stakes and garnering the ropes, Master François, conscious of a strong desire to advance to the tent and have speech with its inmates, found his spurt of motion restrained by a heavy hand on his shoulder. He turned his head and looked with a sickening of the senses into the face of Philippe Sermois, the flat, passionless tablet of a face that seemed in his youthful imagination to sum up all the blank and lifeless terror of a ruined world of tombstones.

Something that glimmered in the depths of Philippe's dull black eyes seemed to reveal to Villon that his elder appreciated and was pleased by the effect that his neighbourhood produced upon his neighbour. He stood quite silent for several seconds that seemed endless to François, holding him by the shoulder and staring at him with that vacuity which, as it seemed to the boy, he might at any moment by raising his hand pluck away, as one would pluck away a mask, revealing heaven knows what hidden horror of knowledge and power and evil to the world. Then the pale lips parted—and their parting made no change in the monumental coldness of the face, and the voice of Sermois dribbled through his teeth like water flowing slowly from a choked tap.

"So, my thing of tinsel, you are in the thick of diversions. You have nothing better to do than to gape and stare at mountebanks, it would seem."

François was nettled by the speaker's assumption of a right to reprove.

"You yourself," he retorted, "seem to have leisure for staring and gaping."

The great expressionless face of Sermois lowered itself to the face of François.

"Am I to be denied pleasure?" he asked. "Is it only my whipper-snapper from Paris that may strut about and enjoy himself? Even the poor drudge before you has his holiday now and then, and takes the air and rubs elbows with his betters. I shall come to Paris one day, Master Jackanape, I shall come to Paris and have my fling as well as another."

Master François was about to express the polite hope that if and when Philippe Sermois came to Paris, he might be permitted to enjoy his visit; but before he could frame any phrase, Sermois suddenly changed the subject of conversation.

"There was a brave dancing jade," he said. "Have you ever seen a face like hers before?"

Another, asking the question as he asked it, would have flung something of a leer upon his features, something of a sneer into his voice. The visage and the speech alike of Sermois were monotonous. But François knew that the leer and the sneer were there for all that. Something within him warned him, he knew not why, not to reply to his questioner, as he would have replied frankly enough to another, that he had seen the face before, whoever else's face it might recall to him. So he said nothing, and contented himself with shaking his head and easing his shoulder from the weight of Sermois' hand. The look in Sermois' eyes suggested that if his face had been of a more flexible composition it would have grinned.

"So," he said, "what a little bundle of discretion we are. We will stand mumchance, will we, when we see a mountebank's trull that is no other than the picture of the radiant fair we worship. Damn you for a hypocritical knave of a painted page. If you were less of a fool we might be cater-cousins in a winning game. But, as it is——"

He broke off, and suddenly swinging his hand, he dealt François a box of the ear, so violently directed and so well

delivered that it sent the lad staggering and sprawling to the ground. When François painfully regained his feet the figure of Philippe Sermois was lost in the dissolving crowd.

The first thought of François on recovering his equilibrium was to hasten in pursuit of Philippe Sermois. Though to his rage he recognized him as his physical master, and it was already the philosophical habit of François to take patent facts for granted, and not to waste time or temper in whining over unpalatable truths, he was not of that docility or prudence which would take or leave a cuff unchallenged. Philippe Sermois was stronger than he. Philippe Sermois was a most unpleasant acquaintance. The thing to do under ordinary conditions was to avoid Philippe Sermois, as much as possible—and there an end. But here were no ordinary conditions. François had been hit a foul blow and had been hit hard, and the anger of his spirit overcame his physical repugnance to suffer further hurt. Intent upon a pursuit which the sobriety of his composition assured him to be rash, if not foolhardy, he looked this way and that way for a sign of his enemy. On looking that way he found himself, to his surprise, face to face with his good lord Messire Robert d'Estouteville. My lord had just quitted the tilt-yard where he had been exercising, and had witnessed the assault upon François. On the face of the giant gentleman there was an expression of unfamiliar gravity, and the regard which he fixed on François was unexpectedly searching and questioning.

"What is going on here?" Messire Robert asked, with a solemnity that seemed to François unnecessary in a matter of mountebanks and a booth.

"At your pleasure, my lord," François answered, "here was a crowd that watched a woman dance."

"I was not speaking of the buffoons and their beholders," Messire Robert said; "mine is another matter. Here on this ground I saw, or I believe I saw, a fellow that was habited in black strike you a buffet that laid you flatlings. What are you going to do about it?"

The cheeks of François flushed.

"My lord," he said, "the rogue is older than I, the rogue is stronger than I; but I mean to have a slap at him."

The look of disapproval on the countenance of Messire Robert slowly dissipated.

"Who shall be sure that a man is stronger than himself until he has put it to the assay?" he said gravely. "But, anyway, I like your mettle. If it were possible that you were of such a spirit as to take a blow in patience and say no more about it, then I should say of you that you might possibly make a passable monk, but that you would never again carry my coat on your body."

As he spoke, my lord prodded Villon's chest with a huge forefinger on the spot where the page's jerkin carried the blazon of the master's arms.

"If you please, my lord," François said stoutly, "I will demand satisfaction from this fellow when I next encounter him."

"Good," commented Messire Robert, and nodded his great head in approval. "Do you know where this fellow dwelleth?"

"Yes, my lord," François answered. "He lives with a kinsman of my uncle's, the very Reverend Canon Anselm Pommier, hard by the church of St. Lawrence, Martyr."

"Shall we stroll there together and see if he be at home?" Messire Robert suggested. If the belligerent spirit of François had at all been tempted to flag with cooling, this gracious condescension on the part of his patron would have fanned it to white fire again. He stammered some words of gratitude.

"Then lead the way," Messire Robert demanded, "and trip nimbly, if you please, for the day lengthens."

Thus adjured, Master François made off at as brisk a step as he could command in the direction of the dwelling of the good Canon Anselm. His fluttering heart drummed so loudly that he could scarcely hear the heavy, firm tread of my lord behind him. He was to avenge his wounded honour under the eyes of his honoured lord, and he felt like some young knight that seeks to win his spurs. In what seemed no more than a pinch of seconds François and

Messire Robert stood in the dark and dusty living-room of Canon Anselm. As he recognized François, the old man smiled but kept his seat; but when his gaze fell upon the gorgeous garments and portly carriage of Messire Robert d'Estouteville, he instantly appreciated that he was honoured by the presence of some great noble, and rose to his feet incontinently.

"Reverend sir," explained François, "this is my honoured lord and most gracious patron, Messire Robert d'Estouteville."

"This lad and I," said Messire d'Estouteville briskly, "have come in search of a youth of yours with whom we wish to change a few words. Is he, by a happy chance, within?"

"Yes," Canon Anselm replied, with a surprised look upon his gentle face, "Philippe has newly returned and is upstairs at this moment."

Turning, he opened a small oaken door behind him, and poking his pointed head through the aperture, he piped in a high voice:

"Philippe, Philippe, come hither instanter."

Then he retired into the room. There followed a dull thudding of descending feet, and in another moment Philippe entered the room. Such surprise as he must have felt to find François there in the company of the great lord of Estouteville he was able to control completely. With a face of marble, he stood and waited for his master's commands. But it was Messire Robert, and not Canon Anselm, who spoke.

"I have need of a word with your clerk, reverend sir," he said. "May it be your pleasure that he accompany me into yonder garden?"

Though my lord spoke pleasantly enough, putting his demand after the manner of a petition, it was very plain that he expected it to be interpreted as a command, and it was equally plain that the much puzzled canon so interpreted it.

"Surely, my lord, surely," he hastened to respond. Then he turned to Philippe.

"Go with my lord," he ordered, "and be sure you do his bidding."

Philippe caused his body to undergo a contortion intended to represent a bow of obedience, and returned to his habitual air of horrible negation. Messire Robert pushed open the door leading into the garden, and placing a massive hand upon the shoulder of François, led him into the free air. With a finger of the other hand he beckoned to Philippe to follow. Philippe obeyed rigidly. Canon Anselm, left alone, said to himself, "Well, well," and sat for a moment with an air of mild bewilderment on his amiable, wrinkled face. Then he stooped again over the book he had been studying at the moment of my lord's interruption, and in a few seconds forgot all about it, lost to the world in the homilies of Saint Polycarpus.

Once in the garden Messire Robert, his hand still affably resting on the shoulder of François, marched slowly forward, looking about him for some spot that should afford convenient shelter. The most favourable site was that little grassy space enclosed by trees within whose limits François and Philippe had held parley on the day of their first meeting. Messire Robert gave a neigh of satisfaction, lusty as one of his own war-horses.

"Yonder," he said, "is the very spot for our little communing." He moved thither in great strides, drawing François with him, while Philippe followed like a distorted shadow. When they were within the ring of trees, Messire Robert released Villon's shoulder and set him opposite to Philippe, who stood patiently respectful, with a dead face that harboured no hint of curiosity or surprise.

"This lad here," said my lord gravely—and François could see that he was as much in earnest about this small business as if some mighty problem of tournament laws were under discussion—"maintains that he has received signal affront at your hands, and he demands satisfaction."

The parting of Philippe's mouth broke for a moment the platitude of his face.

"I do not hear him demand anything," he said, and

though the voice was toneless the speech had the venom of a sneer. Messire Robert's face flushed a little.

"Hark ye," he said, "my black jackanape, you will do well not to be merry at my expense."

Philippe folded his arms meekly across his body.

"I am never merry," he asserted tonelessly.

"By St. Christopher," grunted the knight, "you seem to speak truth, but that is neither here nor there. Here is the matter in brief. You struck this lad a felon blow, for while he lay flatlings and unable to return it, you took to your heels and quitted the field. He is here now to demand satisfaction for that foul stroke. Are you not, François?"

My lord turned to his young companion, who nodded his head and said "Yes" very fiercely.

Messire Robert turned again to Philippe.

"You hear?"

Philippe jerked his cheese-face forward in sign of assent.

"What satisfaction," he asked, "does the young gentleman desire? Will a humble apology for ruffling his daintiness serve the turn?"

François was rather dashed at this tame conclusion of the squabble, and his disappointed face showed that he took the apology of Philippe in no cordial spirit. He was relieved, however, by the next words of his lord.

"No youth who carries my colours," he said solemnly, "could admit that such an affront might possibly be expiated by any form of apology. That stroke must be returned, and squarely."

"I did not think," Philippe said smoothly, "that the young gentleman would have taken my little buffet so seriously"—here he turned his lack-lustre eyes for a moment on François, and their vacuity seemed so terrible that François would have welcomed in preference some show of the derision that was, he felt sure, intended—"but if he feels that his proud spirit cannot be satisfied without dealing me a cuff in return, why, here I stand ready to receive his stroke in all meekness and humility."

As he spoke, he turned his head a little as if to offer one blank white cheek to the proposed blow. François glanced

at Messire Robert to see how this show of contrition affected him.

"What, in heaven's name," Robert cried, "do you mean by your meekness and humility? My boy here is hot to give you a drubbing for the affront you have put upon him, or to take one if you can prove yourself the better man. Here is a clear and pleasant space, so strip off your jerkins and go at it hammer and anvil, till the one or the other of you be worsted."

The two youths peeled to their shirts and faced each other, the elder collected and wary, the younger eager and impatient.

They stood opposed and poised for a space of seconds. Then François sprang forward, hoping to get in the first blow. Suddenly he seemed to be aware of the end of the world. The solid earth appeared to split beneath his feet; the firmament to be rent apart; constellations unexpected in the light of day to wheel around him in offensive profusion. What had really happened was that Sermois, reaching at him with one of his long arms, had caught him a clout on the side of his head that made his temples ring again. Then reeling heaven and wheeling earth grew steadier; the dancing stars paled and faded, and François fiercely realized that he was on his feet again and hot to renew the struggle. He was aware of leaping forward, of lunging with all his length of arm and strength of purpose at that blank, platter face, and then of receiving another swinging clap at the unbruised side of his noddle, which sent him staggering a few paces to fall his full length upon the grass. But almost instantly he had scrambled to his feet again and flung himself in a blind fury upon his adversary.

Thereon ensued a somewhat protracted scuffle, François hammering wildly and ineffectually at his antagonist and his antagonist hammering steadily and effectually at him. Then a slogging stroke from Sermois toppled François over again, and he lay gasping on the grass, with a horrid taste of blood in his mouth from a cut lip and a hateful humming in his ears.

As he lay there aching, it seemed to him that he had neither the strength nor the energy to renew the conflict. This repeated acquaintance with his mother earth had not the revivifying effect attributed thereto in the classic story. He sat up a little, and feeling as if he were choking, he put his fingers to the neck of his shirt to loosen it a little, and in so doing found new courage for the struggle. For they touched a little trinket which he carried at his neck on a string of silk. It was a small pendant of enamelled gold, and it was set round with a circle of small stones in this order: Amethyst, moonstone, beryl, ruby, opal, jacynth, sapphire, emerald, diamond, emerald, lapis-lazuli, opal, ruby, emerald. They spell thus the name Ambroise de Lor[illegible].

The lady had caused it to be made by a jeweller o Saumur, and she gave it to François to pay him, as sh said, for his pains in her service in the carrying to her of so many sweet verses from my lord. The contact with this amulet quickened his senses; the thought of Ambroise came into his brain—up to this moment she might never have existed for all that he had thought of her—and it seemed clear to him that what befell him was of no importance so long as he carried himself in this business as she would, if she had thought of him, wish him to carry himself. And so, while the table of Philippe's face was allowing itself to express so much sentience as to express a hint of victory, François was on his feet again, and flinging himself, with a ferocity that seemed whimsical in so small a personage, upon his enemy. Before Sermois quite realized that he was attacked Villon was hard upon him, hitting anywhere and everywhere, any way and anyhow. For an appreciable space of seconds, the lad in black, taken amazingly by surprise, staggered and gave way. Only for a few seconds, however. Then with a beastly scream of rage he flung himself upon his challenger, clapped his large hands about his throat, and hurling all his weight against him bore him to the ground. There he knelt upon him, and while the clutching fingers of his right hand laboured busily to choke the life out of him the seeking fingers of the left hand slipped under the neck of the shirt.

The big body of Messire Robert bowed forward, the long arm of Messire Robert extended, the iron fingers of Messire Robert caught Philippe Sermois by the back of the neck.

"Let go," he said grimly, and Sermois released his gripping right hand, while he closed the fingers of his left hand tighter on his palm.

François dropped from his relaxed grasp and sprawled supine.

Messire Robert held Sermois in the air as a gamekeeper might hold a rabbit, shook him vigorously, and planted him, staggering and gasping, on the earth again just at the moment in which François, swallowing and goggling, scrambled to his feet and looked vacantly about him.

François was not able to see very much, for the assault of his adversary had closed up one eye and made its companion unpleasantly puffy. But what he did see was sufficiently amazing to make him forget for the moment that his upper lip was split and bleeding; that his nose was running like a red fountain, and that his head and every inch of his body ached as if they had been passed between the stones of a fulling-mill. Philippe Sermois was facing Messire Robert of Estouteville, a Philippe Sermois that Villon had never seen before. The bland, blank face was now convulsed with a paroxysm of rage; the flat, fat voice was raised to a shriek.

"Why did you interfere?" he screamed in a passion of anger that for the moment annihilated his sense of respect for the rank of my lord and the grave danger to himself of so forgetting. "I was the victor, I was the stronger; you had no right to interfere between the conqueror and the conquered."

My lord leaned a little forward so as to diminish the distance between him and the shrieking, gesticulating figure in black. Then he shot out a long arm, with a fist like a Turk's head at the end of it, and Sermois dropped wallowing on the grass, and lay there like a dead thing.

But he was not dead nor even stunned, and he kept very still, blinking cautiously through low-lidded eyes, while my

lord stood over him and spoke to him, and while my lord spoke Sermois seemed to regain command of himself, and the furious wrinkles which had distorted his countenance smoothed themselves out of existence, and his face reassumed its old, cold vacant showing, for all the world like a shield before any blazon has been painted on its surface.

"I will tell you why I interfered, young master," my lord said sternly. "I interfered because you were turning a fair fight into an unfair one. You claim the right of the conqueror, the right of the stronger man. Well and good. So do I. If you are stronger than this lad here"—and as he spoke he jerked his great head in the direction where François stood and gaped and stared and dripped—"I also am seemingly stronger than you, and it is only a matter of my own good pleasure whether I do or do not wring your neck as if you were the carrion bird-of-prey you so filthily resemble."

From the smooth, white face of Sermois lying prone there on the grass a smooth, dull voice rose into the air.

"My lord," the voice asserted, "I humbly crave your pardon, and also the pardon of this young gentleman, if I have permitted my heat so far to get the better of my reason, as first to trangress, in any way, the rules and conduct of honourable combat, and, second, to venture presumptuously to question any action of yours, my honoured lord."

There seemed to François something astonishingly queer and uncanny in the sight of that black figure, lying there so still on the green grass, and of that pale, empty face, which might have been stone instead of flesh, proffering its pompous apologies, as it were, to the welkin. Messire Robert turned to François.

"What do you say, lad?" he asked. "You have heard what this fellow protests. Are you content to accept his regrets, or shall we have him scourged round the town of Saumur, and leave him thereafter to congratulate himself that he is not hanged in a halter at the end of his whipping."

François cleared the way for freedom of speech by void-

ing a mouthful of blood. The taste of it and the sight of it made him feel foolishly sick and dizzy, and he knew what it was to believe that he was going to faint. But he pulled himself together and answered his lord as cheerfully as he could.

"My dear lord," he said, "with your good consent I would have this fellow go his ways without hindrance or harm. If he has hurt me a little"—internally François reflected ruefully that Sermois had hurt him a great deal—"I, for my part, have done my best to hurt him, and if I have not succeeded it was in no wise for want of the will. Therefore, again with your good pleasure, I would be fain that we should call it quits."

"Very credibly said," my lord approved, "and proving a pretty and a sportsmanlike spirit."

He turned to the still supine Sermois.

"Be up, knave," he commanded, "and be off with no loss of time. I will not have any shaking of hands, for there can be no such show of clean carriage between fighters where one fights fair and one fights foul. Away with you and be glad that your antagonist's chivalry has saved your back and maybe your neck. But I warn you that you will not save your neck if you seek to molest this youth again."

Sermois got to his feet very swiftly. He turned over as he rose and in doing so slipped, for a moment, his still clenched left hand into the breast of his jerkin. When he faced my lord again both his hands were open and extended in a deferential gesture of respect. He made a very profound obeisance to the lord of Estouteville, and another less profound but still exceedingly respectful to François, with no gleam of his late malice in his fish-like eyes. Then, turning, he made for the house with all swiftness and in a few seconds was out of sight.

Messire Robert, turning to François with some words of commendation ready to issue from his lips, changed his smile into a frown as he noted that the eyes of François were running over, and that tears were lacing the blood and dirt upon his contused cheeks.

"Gog's name," he cried, "what are you blubbering for?

What kind of a man will you make if you cry for a sore nose?"

"I was not crying for my sore nose," François faltered in explanation. "I was crying perforce because I cannot appear before my lady Ambroise de Loré in this pitiful condition."

My lord of Estouteville gave a great laugh, which seemed to reverberate among the trees like baby thunder.

"What a rogue it is!" he shouted, hugely amused. "Why, lad alive, do you think there is a woman in the world who would not rather see the signs of fight upon her servant's face than the emptiness of a smooth skin. She will rather kiss you ten times than one time for the sake of those same honourable scars."

So François was led away in honour and cheer by his master. They did not return to the Canon's house, but after François had huddled on his clothes they passed out by a gate at the far end of the garden, and so found the road and made their way to Canon Guillaume's lodgings. François felt very giddy and dizzy and sick, for, in good truth, he had been sadly mauled by Sermois; but he did his best to carry himself stiffly, and the strong hand of Messire Robert under his arm supported him. But when they reached their goal the lad was fairly spent. My lord, after telling the story to the astonished Canon in few words, saw that the lad was given a draught of wine, which so drenched his tired senses with drowsiness that he fell half asleep, standing, and was promptly put to bed in an almost unconscious condition.

The next morning he awoke to memory of not inglorious defeat and to discovery that was worse than defeat—the discovery that he had lost his precious talisman, the gracious gift of Ambroise. He knew that he wore it as usual the previous day; he seemed to remember touching it by chance during an interval of combat. And now it was gone. It might have fallen from him in the struggle in the garden; he might have dropped it on the road during his half-conscious journey homewards. It might perhaps even be in the house where he lodged. But though he searched the

house and questioned its inmates he failed to find his treasure. It seemed hopeless to search the roadway, yet he did search, and quite in vain. He entered Canon Anselm's garden stealthily by the garden gate, and reviewed the trampled field of yesterday's battle, but to no avail. His amulet was gone; there was no help for it, and François was too unhappy to weep. He resolved that he would not tell the lady Ambroise of his loss; she would think him unforgivably careless; she might think he was soliciting another gift. So François kept his sorrow to himself and felt abjectly wretched.

He was not, however, to be without consolation. He found, to his delight, that those comforting words of his lord about Ambroise's approval of his conduct and indifference to the damage to his appearance were as true as any of the utterances of the ancient prophets. For when next he came into her presence, which was in a couple of days after the fray, with a brand new ballade pinched in his fingers and a horrid consciousness of his contused countenance and tumid eyelids dragging at his heart, he was suddenly enraptured to find himself clasped in the kind arms of his lady, and to hear himself crooned over and pitied and praised, as if he had been Messire Hector at Troy or Messire Roland at Roncesvalles.

To listen to the lady, who had heard a full account of the battle from Robert d'Estouteville there never was a valianter fellow of his years and inches—how François wished for more of each!—than the lad who played the go-between in her sweet and honourable commerce with the giant knight. Almost François persuaded himself that he had a kind of liking for Philippe Sermois, so much in the way of petting and cosseting and comforting did he, in a sense, owe to him. From all of which the lad gathered the salutary lesson that for one of his sex a smooth skin is not necessarily the best commendation to ladies.

After his wish to recover his lost talisman flourished another wish very lustily in the mind of François, the wish to find again the Burgundian mountebank, or rather to find Huguette. But the one wish seemed as little likely to be

realized as the other. The pair of strollers had vanished like apparitions, themselves and their tent and their shock-headed confederates had disappeared as if they had never been. Though Saumur was but a small town, and though François searched it diligently, he sought without success, and could find no trace of them. Others had seen them give their show on that memorable day of fisticuffs, but though François in his research questioned many such, no one could give a hint at to where the mountebanks dwelt or what had become of them. François could but conclude that the Burgundian, not finding Saumur in festival season so profitable as he hoped, had packed up his traps and gone off to glean in other fields. François was somewhat sorry, for he would have liked to see his childhood's playmate again; but it was hard to nourish any sorrow just then, when the glory of Saumur was approaching its zenith. Even recollection of the loss of the gift of Ambroise stung less bitterly in the whirl and wonder of the hour.

CHAPTER XIII

THE TOURNAMENT—AND AFTER

VIEWED in one regard the sojourn of François at Saumur seemed long enough to bulk out a lifetime, so crammed had it been with incidents, so heady with new and stimulating emotions. Viewed in another regard it seemed to have gone by with the swiftness of a dream, like a gaily-tinted soap-bubble blown forward by the hot breath of a sirocco. And now it was rapidly drifting to its inevitable end. But a few more glowing days of golden hours, and all the lords and ladies, court-cards of the social pack, would be new shuffled and re-dealt elsewhere. Very soon the varletry would be busy packing armour and apparel into boxes and baskets; very soon the paraphernalia of pageantry would vanish, pennons run down, painted shields removed, gala poles dismantled and unshipped. For the event that had been the occasion of all the glitter and display, the great tournament appointed by King René, was at hand. Once the joustings were over Saumur would rapidly become its everyday self again. Even so it would, thanks to its jovial king, be livelier than most other cities, but even the liveliest city cannot live in a state of perpetual merry-making.

Came at length the eve of the great tournament; came at last the day of the great tournament. It was a very splendid tournament, like a thousand other splendid tournaments, that stirred the hearts and heads of lords and ladies and covered pages of parchment with gallant and forgotten records. Picture the lists, the pavilions, the heralds, the pennons, the lovely ladies, the shields, brave with those devices which make the science of heraldry an exquisite delight to the devout image-worshipper. Think of all those

fantastic animals, fantastically presented, of those startling juxtapositions of colour, those fascinating patterns, those glowing golds and silvers, those flamboyant defiant mottoes. Think of the armour and the trumpets and the serried ranks of gentility on the benches and the throng of honest every-day citizens ranged on tiers above their worldly betters, and the rabble swarming on every spot of advantage, roof or bough or hillock, that might afford a glimpse of the goodly scene. Think of the shouting of men and the squalling of women, and the neighing of steeds; think of the tilting and the tossing, of the cracking of lances, the shattering of shields, the slapping of swords, the hammering of axes. Think, finally, of the arena littered with prostrate heroes, the thundered applause, the stifled sighs, and the victor prancing up with something of a snigger to receive the laurel of victory.

Cease from thinking, for the fights are fought, and chiefly the fight which most moved the heart of François. The great contest between Messire Robert d'Estouteville and the lord of Beauvau is chronicled at great length in a folio parchment of many pages preserved in the Abbey of Bonne Aventure in Poitou. Let it be sufficient here to record that Messire Robert d'Estouteville overcame the lord of Beauvau on horse and on foot, with sword and with lance, after a struggle so prolonged that there were moments when the spectators were tempted to believe that it would rival in duration the famous battle between Roland and Oliver in the days of Charlemagne the King. Messire Robert received the prize of victory from the white hand of the lady Ambroise—whom King René had been pleased to appoint as Queen of Beauty for the occasion—and, better still, such a glance of admiration as very nearly made the stout knight who had fought so well fall from his saddle in a swoon of joy.

François watched his lord's double triumph with quiet eyes and a wild heart. It seemed to him, in his unripe simplicity, that the end of the world had come, that nothing now mattered, or could possibly ever matter again, to him. His thoughts flew from the glittering scene of mimic war-

fare and lodged themselves in a monastery of dreams. He saw himself, very pale and grave and stern, long lines of care and vigil furrowing his face, pacing and pondering in a cloister. He saw himself delivering harangues to enraptured congregations who would bear abroad the fame of his saintliness. He saw himself dying in the very glory of holiness, only to shock the assembled Fathers by the post-mortem discovery in a reliquary on his breast of a single lock of the fair hair of the lady Ambroise. How he was to obtain possession of that same single lock of gold hair was a problem which he, in his ecstasy, did not trouble to consider. The fancy that had established him as a monk established him also as the possessor of the treasured lock. And because he was sorry for himself, he had it in his heart to be sorry also for Messire de Beauvau.

He was not nearly so sorry for Messire de Beauvau as Messire de Beauvau was. For it was now blown abroad in Saumur that the lady Ambroise would soon change her surname for that of d'Estouteville, and though no one in all Saumur was more gracious than Messire de Beauvau in wishing the lady joy, he felt in his heart that he had been very ill-used.

Messire de Beauvau was walking by the riverside away from Saumur on the morning after the great tournament in a mood of bitter melancholy. He had failed to win the prize in the lists; he had lost thereby his fairest chance of gaining the favour of the lady Ambroise; his chuckle-headed rival—for so, it is to be feared, Messire de Beauvau, in the pride of his scholarship, rated Messire Robert d'Estouteville—was walking on the straight highway to her heart. The green, warm world seemed very grey and cold to my lord of Beauvau, and because he was a poet with all a poet's whimsies, instead of trying to forget his cares with wine or exercise, or change of air, he chose to remain in Saumur and to eat his heart—most unwholesome nourishment for a gentleman of his disposition. Here was he, Louis of Beauvau, Lord Seneschal of Anjou, high in the favour of King René, famous amongst poets for his exquisite version of Boccaccio's tale of Patient Grizzel, con-

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demned by the whim of a minx's disposition to wander, a disconsolate swain, by the side of a river he once thought as brilliant as Ilyssus, and now found as dismal as Styx. He may perhaps be pardoned if he marvelled not a little at the taste of the lady. Victory on the lists was, at the best, little more than an accident. It might very well befall that if Messire de Beauvau were to ride against Messire d'Estouteville on the morrow he might gain the day and unhorse the huge fellow. But that one who could rhyme so beautifully as himself, one who had been crowned with the golden laurels by King René at the last Parliament of Love, should be set on one side for a fellow that could not match "heart" with "smart" to save his life was an injury hard to endure.

Messire de Beauvau, believing himself to be alone on the river path, was permitting himself that indulgence in gesticulation which choleric folk under such conditions are tempted to affect. He drove the clenched fist of his right hand into the open palm of his left. He agitated both hands in anger above his head; he came to a pause and stamped angrily with alternate feet. Quite suddenly he ceased these manœuvres on becoming aware that they were not without witness. And such a witness! Very quietly, from the covert of the hedge, a shabby black figure upreared itself, the figure of a man with a flat face, of a man whose rusty garments were stained with mud and tricked with straws and grasses that suggested a considerable term of occupation of the ditch. Messire de Beauvau's hand moved briskly to the hilt of his dagger, anticipatory of the possible assassin, footpad, ambuscader. But the fellow with the face like a dish held up two large and empty hands in token of peaceful intent, and called out that he meant no offence and only entreated a few words of speech with the lord of Beauvau.

"Now what the devil do you want with me?" snapped the lord of Beauvau querulously. He was at odds with the world that morning, and he greatly resented this intrusion on his solitude.

"Monseigneur," said Philippe Sermois very respectfully,

bowing low, and as he did so hastily brushing from his jerkin and hose their objectionable fringe of vegetation, "has it ever been your fortune to hear an antique fable about a lion and a mouse?"

"Of course I have," Messire de Beauvau retorted crossly. He was in a mood to bid this newcomer go to the devil, and to kick him somewhere in that direction if he presumed to linger, and yet there was a peculiarity in the fellow's bearing which arrested my lord's attention, and commanded, as it were in spite of himself, his interest. Messire de Beauvau prided himself upon being a student of mankind, and such a specimen of the genus was unfamiliar to him. So he bridled his tongue and shackled his foot, and suffered by his silence the intruder to proceed.

"Honoured sir," Sermois began, "we stand in a public road that affords no comfortable place for private commune. Will it please you to withdraw a little ways with me, to a spot where we shall be more private and discreet?"

Messire de Beauvau looked at Sermois with frowning eyebrows.

"I have no need of private speech with you, fellow," he said sharply. "If this be a prelude to the asking of alms you waste my time. Take your penny and go your ways."

Messire de Beauvau, as he spoke, plucked a silver coin from the pouch at his girdle and flung it on the ground, where it lay a glittering disk between him and his interlocutor. Sermois made no stoop to pick it up; his meaningless face was still turned in the direction of my lord.

"I ask no alms," he said dully, "though I may hope for guerdon. I am come hither to offer you some good advice on a matter which, as I believe, touches your heart. If I am wrong, I need no penny fee for my pains. If I am right, it is not with a single silver piece that you will be paying my services."

Messire de Beauvau fretted at the phlegm and pertinacity of the fellow.

"In the devil's name, man," he commanded, "put a stop to this nonsense. There lies my charity in the road for the

next gipsy to take if your stomach disdains it. But there is no service you can render me which is worth the double of that petty coin there in the dust."

"Are you so sure of that?" Sermois said evenly. "Not even if the service were to help you with the lady Ambroise de Loré?"

Messire de Beauvau started at this unexpected echo of his thoughts.

"Who are you," he asked, "that dare to conjure my sympathy with the name of that lady?"

"I am one," said Sermois calmly, "that can do you the best of good turns if you are willing to listen to my counsel, and thereafter, if you find it fruitful, to recompense me according to my own measure of my deserts. For, indeed, I have no desire to work for nothing, but rather hope for gain in this business."

"What in the devil's name," asked the knight angrily, "can you do for me, fellow, that is likely to prove of service to me with regard to the lady Ambroise de Loré? As to your naming of her name, though I admit it took me aback for an instant, another instant has reminded me that my devotion to the lady Ambroise is no secret in Saumur. But I have yet to learn that it gives every jack-rascal the right to try and make a trade of such knowledge."

As he spoke, Messire de Beauvau advanced menacingly towards Sermois, who, however, stood his ground with empty, unchanging face. This immobility had its effect upon the knight, who paused in his progress as if he expected Sermois to say more. In this expectation he was gratified, for Sermois spoke again.

"There is no chivalrous spirit in all Anjou," he said heavily, "who is not aware of the noble devotion of the lord of Beauvau for the incomparable lady Ambroise de Loré. But, also, it is no secret that the lord of Beauvau has a rival . . . indeed he has many rivals, but we need only speak of the one that counts . . . and that the star of that rival, long time as it lay in abeyance, has of late seemed to outshine your lordship's star. Is it not so?"

"It is so indeed," Messire de Beauvau answered with a

frown; "but it needs no great wisdom to discern what every soul knows in Saumur. There is no profit in such gossip, friend."

"There is no profit in any gossip," Philippe answered calmly. "I should not waste your lordship's time if I had no more to say than that your lordship is hot to win the hand of the lady Ambroise de Loré, and that Robert d'Estouteville seems to prove the favoured swain. That is an old wives' tale by now."

Messire de Beauvau's countenance darkened as he listened to words that had a latent sneer in them, though the face from which they issued showed no corresponding significance.

"Say your say plainly, and say it quickly, or it may be the worse for you," he threatened.

Sermois listened to the menace unmoved. He twitched an overlooked straw from his jerkin, a blade or two of grass from his hose, and then again turned the screen of his face upon the knight.

"My lord," he said, "if I can give you assurance that the heart of your lady is not assigned without recovery to my lord of Estouteville, will that count for something in your judgment?"

"How can you give me assurance?" asked the knight angrily; "and of what worth is it when you do give it? You, I take it, are scarcely in the lady's counsels."

"It is never wise in life to judge rashly," Philippe answered with unmoved composure. "It is not for me to say how far the lady honours me with her commands. But it is for me to say this much, that if I bring you to secret sight of her, to secret greeting from her, will that seem some proof of my deserving?"

"Secret sight, secret greeting!" echoed the astonished gentleman. "What in heaven's name do you mean when you fling such words about?"

"I mean what I say, neither a pennyweight more nor less," Sermois answered tranquilly. "All I seek to know is, if such an event would afford your lordship any gratification?"

"You speak," said Messire de Beauvau, "as if it were in your power to bring such an event about."

"I speak so," Sermois responded calmly, "because it is in my power. I am the wise man who reads the hidden thought. For instance, I can read your thoughts, my lord, as if they were written on the tables of your face. And I can read no less plainly the thoughts of the lady Ambroise. In public, to please her parents, she must seem to favour this bullock of Estouteville. In private, she would choose to favour you."

Messire de Beauvau cannot be blamed for a sudden fervid elation, albeit he could not indeed believe his ears, and his reason challenged desire.

"Surely you are talking madness," he murmured, "and I am no better than a madman to listen to you."

Sermois shrugged his shoulders.

"You are free to think what you please, my lord," he said, "but if you choose, you shall see the lady Ambroise to-night, and get such a greeting as will cheer you exceedingly."

"If you are speaking the truth," cried de Beauvau hoarsely, "you shall have as much gold as you can carry. If you are lying, I will see to it that you are first flogged and then hanged."

"I am not so heedless of my back or my neck," Sermois replied composedly, "as to trifle with great lords. If you choose to meet me to-night at a place which I shall name I will fulfil my promise."

The knight knitted his forehead.

"Why should I believe you?" he asked. Mentally he was wondering what enemies he might have who could spread such a snare. There were jealous husbands, it might be, in Saumur; angry brothers. Heaven alone knew, and it behoved him to be wary.

No hint of expression on the face of Philippe showed that he saw and appreciated the knight's forgivable solicitude. But he made an unpleasant noise, which he intended, and which the knight angrily understood, to represent laughter.

"There is nothing very dangerous," he said slowly, "in a tryst with a pretty maid. I think Messire d'Estouteville would jump to be so favoured, and I wish with all my heart that it were in my power to offer him the opportunity. He would be too glad to have time to think that I was planning his assassination."

Messire de Beauvau was hotly annoyed that he should have allowed his courage to be called in question by this shabby pantaloon. Yet he was still too wise not to be wary.

"If the lady Ambroise took you for her ambassador," he said carefully, "I have it in my mind that she would send some token by you to prove your good faith. For, indeed, you do not seem to me such an one as fair ladies would choose for their go-between."

Sermois made Messire de Beauvau a profound bow.

"Your lordship," he said, "is blessed with a most commendable prudence, and it is pleasure for a philosopher . . . for so I count myself . . . to have traffic with you. I waited with patience for this moment, with its proof of your lordship's foresight and craft. Let me remind your lordship that I have never for one moment spoken of myself as the ambassador of the lady Ambroise."

Messire de Beauvau was conscious of an uncomfortable feeling that this sad fellow in black was making game of him. But there was no hint of entertainment, of double meaning, or indeed, of any meaning, on the platter face which Messire de Beauvau scrutinized so sharply.

"What do you mean, fellow?" he questioned imperiously.

"My lord," said Sermois impassively, "I mean that it is in my power to bring you face to face with your lady this night and to learn of her love for you."

Messire de Beauvau stepped back a few steps and crossed himself hastily, while for so brave a gentlemen he eyed the fellow in black with an air of apprehension that in one less noble would have been coarsely designated as fear.

"Are you a dealer in magic?" he said hoarsely. "Get thee hence, Satan."

Even as he spoke he plucked his sword from its sheath. But he did not do this in order to strike at Sermois with

the weapon. He caught the naked blade in both h.. hands and held the cross-shaped hilt above his head as an emblem of menace to any emissary of the foul fiend.

The vacant face of Sermois showed no sign of alarm at this religious demonstration. His absolute callousness relieved a little the perturbation of the lord of Beauvau, who lowered the hilt of his sword and rested his chin on the pommel.

"I am in study for the Church," said Sermois calmly. "I hope soon to be a clerk in holy orders. It is scarcely likely that I should be a dealer and trafficker in the black magic."

My lord, much reassured by the tranquillity of Sermois' answer, dropped the point of his sword to the ground and rested his hands on the hilt.

"But," continued Sermois slowly, "there are, as one so learned as your lordship must surely be aware, two kinds of magic—the black magic and the white. The first is condemned by our mother the Church, and abhorred by all Christian spirits. The second, which is and can be only employed for the benefit of mankind, is, if not precisely enjoined and ordained by ecclesiastical authority, at least rather approved of than merely condoned and winked at, as I could prove to your lordship easily enough if this were the place and your lordship's the leisure, by many direct testimonies of the fathers of the early Church and the divines of more recent but no less religious times."

Messire de Beauvau, not a little impressed by the delivery of this discourse and edified by its pith, put his sword back into its house and banished all signs of uneasiness from his comely countenance.

"You are an adept in this kind of white magic?" he questioned. Sermois bowed his head.

"I am," he answered simply. "It is my dream of life to make people happy, and this my innocent wizardries have many times accomplished."

"Well," said Messire de Beauvau, "I will meet you tonight at what time and place you name."

Sermois bowed respectfully, and then approaching the

lord of Beauvau, whispered into his ear the place of meeting.

"One word further," he added aloud. "It is essential to my lady's health and welfare that you promise here and now to obey any conditions which I, in regard for her dignity and honour, may find it discreet and becoming to put upon you, before I bring you into her presence."

"You are damnably mysterious!" the knight retorted. "What conditions do you speak of?"

Sermois moved his smooth face slowly from side to side in sign of negation.

"I cannot tell you," he answered simply, "for I do not know. When I meet you to-night I will communicate the conditions upon which I am able to grant you an interview with your lady. If they do not please you, you are always at liberty to run away."

De Beauvau, who had never in his life recoiled from a combat or a love-tryst, winced at the form of Philippe's speech, though he could take no exception to the wholly deferential fashion in which it was uttered.

"Very good," he said coldly. "I will be at the tryst to-night."

He turned on his heel and retrod his path, leaving Sermois behind him, gazing after him with an inscrutable face.

CHAPTER XIV

WHITE MAGIC

IN a small town like Saumur people who buzz about a good deal are apt to see much of their fellow-citizens. Now François buzzed as briskly as any bee, for to him the Angevin city was a very parterre of flowers, and he at his happiest when most active in tasting its varied sweets. Especially was his activity intense on the day succeeding to the jousting because the tournament marked the apogee of the revels of King René, and thereafter was but a brisk declension to the homeward trot. Now Master François, nipping hither and thither through the golden afternoon, happened once and again to come across the Sire de Beauvau and to be puzzled at each encounter. For whereas he had expected the defeated knight to wear a dejected, not to say hang-dog, countenance, not only by reason of his defeat, but by reason of the consequences which popular report tagged on to that disaster, he found, on the contrary, that the gentleman aired a smiling face, and seemed very well content with the world in general and with himself in particular. Of course this carriage might be no more than the dashing mask worn to deceive or to defy the world; but to François it seemed more natural than feigned, and it puzzled him amazingly; for it was inconceivable that a man could be truly happy who had lost his chance of winning the lady Ambroise.

François was, indeed, too much occupied with the study of his own complicated emotions to waste any great effort of thought upon my lord of Beauvau and his seeming. But it so happened that Messire de Beauvau was, as it were, forced upon his attention that same evening and in this

wise. In the fall of the day his own lord, Messire d'Estouteville, who had been carousing with his Majesty and a merry fellowship, had suddenly felt a summons of the Muse; that is to say, he had suddenly felt that he ought to offer his sweet lady some verses. Wherefore he promptly sent for François and called upon his page to provide them. François, who was now so nimble an improvisator that he could respond on the hop to these eccentric commands, rapidly fabricated a rondeau with a sufficiently dainty thread of conceit to hold it together, and a sufficiently whimsical burden to give its love-sweetness a salt or spice of humour. This his lord would needs have carried to his lady's hands that very night; and François, nothing loathe, wrote it out fair on a square of parchment, tied it into a roll with a piece of cherry-coloured ribbon, and made off through the dusk to the house that had the happiness of sheltering Ambroise. Although the hour was somewhat late, the porter, who knew François well enough by this time, and who guessed that yesterday's victory had enhanced, in no small degree, the favour of my lord of Estouteville, was ready and eager to send word to the lady.

So François had a sweet glimpse of his adored, and she cooed over the verses he carried, and petted him for his pains, and treated him daintily to cake and wine, and then dismissed him, charging him to carry her kindest thanks to his master. François dipped into the dusk again with a sense of having feasted in Paradise. Indeed, he was so busied with his delicious thoughts, that he well-nigh ran into a man muffled in a great hooded cloak that was walking at a swift pace in the contrary direction. He got entangled in the folds of the cloak, and when he extricated himself, he perceived that the enwrapped individual was none other than the high and puissant lord Messire de Beauvau. Messire de Beavau, to whom the face of François would have meant nothing even if he had noted it, paid no heed to his gabble of apology, but brushed him good-humouredly to one side and continued his journey at the same rapid gait as before.

François stood in the roadway and looked after his departing figure thoughtfully. What, he wondered, was Messire de Beauvau doing abroad at that hour and so mysteriously mantled? The fantastic thought occurred to him that possibly Messire de Beauvau might be attempting to visit Ambroise. If this were indeed the case, it was a matter in which it was his duty to Messire Robert to be informed. Instantly he turned in his course, and under cover of the deepening darkness, followed Messire de Beauvau.

Contrary to François' expectations Messire de Beauvau did not come to a halt at the dwelling of Ambroise. François believed, indeed, that as the knight passed the portal he tilted his head to glance up at its front; but he sped on his way, and François, spurred by curiosity, sped after him. It had been a childish game of François, in his playground of the Paris streets, to pick upon some casual passer-by, and to follow him or her to the destination, just for the mere fun of the follow-my-leader game, and the amusement it afforded him to think how surprised the quarry would be, were it suddenly informed of the unconscious chase. In the same spirit of idle curiosity the lad now set himself to stalk Messire de Beauvau, though the process took longer and drew him farther afield than he had anticipated. The cloaked gentleman led him to a region of the town that was but sparsely sown with houses. It was in the neighbourhood of the town gibbet, and though that instrument was not abused in the reign of King René, still it was not suffered to stand entirely idle, and therefore its vicinity was not eyed with favour save by those whose poverty did not permit them to be choosers or whose foresight appreciated the fees obtainable for the letting of their roofs and upper windows whenever an execution did take place.

It was dark in the neighbourhood of the gallows, with the exception of a single blotch of crimson light that glowed like the eye of a cyclops through the sinister gloom. The house to which this flaming patch belonged was small and low, and scarcely to be called better than a cabin. It had

no immediate neighbours, and seemed as if it were the ultimate house of the town. Towards this unlovely dwelling Messire de Beauvau made his way with François hot on his track, dodging nimbly among the thick of the shadows and tripping as gingerly as a cat, that he might be neither seen nor heard.

When Messire de Beauvau got to the cabin François could see that he raised his hand as if to strike against the door. But before his hand could fall upon the panel, the door opened swiftly, as if some watcher had hidden there and waited on his coming. A faint flicker of candle-light for a moment teased the darkness and then disappeared, and with it disappeared Messire de Beauvau. François, his senses all on the strain, could hear the muffled sound of a door being shut and bolted.

François was now fairly agog with curiosity and excitement. What mission, he asked himself, could a noble like Messire de Beauvau have in that ill-named, ill-favoured portion of the comely town? What business could he attend, what pleasure pursue, in that grim, ungenial region?

Twittering with excitement, François hastened to follow in the trail of Messire de Beauvau. He had to pick his way warily, for the darkness had increased and the ground was rugged and uneven. But he reached his goal without mishap and stood, with a drumming heart, in front of as squalid and sordid-looking a building as ever he had seen. He wondered why his heart was so agitated. After all, what was it to him if a great gentleman chose to visit a villainous-looking cottage in the suburbs of Saumur. But curiosity conquered philosophy, and though prudence, if not decorum, suggested that he should quit the place and leave Messire de Beauvau to his own devices, the itch to know conquered, and François proceeded to examine the forbidding outside of the house in the hope of obtaining some knowledge of what was going on within.

The red eye of the misshapen giant was indeed a window, closely curtained with a piece of thick crimson cloth, which, though it allowed a measure of the internal illumination to filter through its texture into the night, afforded

apparently no opportunity of discovering anything that went on behind its shield. But if François was denied sight of what the red curtain masked, he was not denied sound. He could hear the mutter of voices within, and though he could not distinguish the words that were uttered, he wondered why he could catch the sound so clearly.

A moment's further examination revealed to him the cause of this phenomenon. The summer day had been very hot; the summer night was scarcely cooler. The window that opened outward, like a double door, had been left slightly ajar to admit some measure of air into the curtained room. Very cautiously Master François enlarged this aperture by a couple of inches or so. There was, as it seemed, but a single curtain that ran on a rod across the whole length of the window. It was a thick curtain; it was an ample curtain, and it hung over the aperture in heavy folds. Very delicately François took hold of one of these same folds between his finger and thumb, and drawing his dagger cautiously from its house, proceeded to make with its sharp point an incision in the cloth. He did not trouble himself to reflect on his indiscretion in thus peeping upon the privacy of others; all that he allowed himself to consider was that if by chance he were discovered the way of safety lay fair and open behind him for a clean pair of heels. Keeping the point of his weapon in the incision he had thus effected, and slightly straining on the fold of cloth he commanded with his left hand, he afforded himself a chink sufficiently large to allow him to peep into the room without any reasonable fear of being discovered.

This is what François saw when he peeped into the room. Messire de Beauvau was on his knees in the middle of the floor, with his back to François. He was clad in a gala habit worthy of the court of King René; and however inappropriate to the outside of that hovel in which he was found, not so strikingly inappropriate to his immediate surroundings. For the squalid walls were draped with hangings that, if faded, still held enough of their original richness of colour and design to lend an air of wealth and dignity to the chamber, and the boarded floor was

spread with carpets and the skins of beasts. The room was divided by a curtain of brocaded silk, patterned in red and gold, in front of where Messire de Beauvau knelt, and to the left of this curtain was a tall stone altar of a pyramidal shape on the top of which a lamp burned with a red fire that gave an uncanny atmosphere to the place. By the side of this altar and hard by the kneeling knight stood a tall figure covered from head to foot in a white gown, the hood of which had holes for eyes. This figure stood with its arms above its head, and it was muttering what seemed to be a kind of prayer or invocation, but muttering so swiftly that François could catch nothing of the words, so closely did the syllables flow after and into one another, although he believed, he scarce knew why, that the speech was Latin.

After a little while, during which the muttering of the white figure continued persistent, and the knight remained kneeling in the same reverential and expectant posture, the gaudy scarlet hangings parted and a figure appeared that was the very opposite of the one that stood by the lord of Beauvau. For the new-comer, though habited indeed in outward form like the other, wore robes of the deepest black. In his hands he carried a great naked sword, such as executioners use, and he rested the point of the blade on the ground and laid his hands, folded from view in the voluminous sleeves of his gown, upon the cross-hilt of the sword and stood rigid as a statue. The gabbling of the figure in white increased in rapidity; the flames on the strange altar flickered and fumed, filling the air with a mist that seemed to carry with it a poisonously sweet perfume. Then from behind the fantastic curtain came the sound of a woman's voice that was singing with an incomparable sweetness, and the air of the song she sang was languorous and passionate and melancholy all in one, and the words of the song she sang were as languorous and passionate and melancholy as the music, and at the sound of the song the knight of Beauvau lifted his head. His whole body seemed to strain to attention, the black figure and the white figure stood poised and watchful.

This was the song that my lord of Beauvau heard, kneel-

ing there in the strangely bedizened room, and that François heard huddled outside against the window in the heat of the summer night:

"You have called and I come to you, lover:
How could I deny?
Can the sun scorn the sweet of the clover;
The sour of the rye?
More strong than the song of the plover
Who calls to his mate in the cover
The sound of your sigh
Commands and I fly.
To the sight of my lord and my lover."

The song was sung with the clear, triumphant freshness of a girl's voice, and the sound of it and the appeal of it, stirred and troubled the heart of François, he did not know why. And the sound of it and the appeal of it seemed to trouble the lord of Beauvau, for he made to move, on his knees, a little nearer to the spot whence it came, until movement was checked by the arresting hand of the whitened figure by his side. Then all of a sudden the figure in black plucked the sword-point from the floor and swung the great weapon in front of him to form a barrier, and then the curtains parted and a woman came forth of the opening, and flung herself across the sword, so that her tender breasts rested on its extended edge, and she stretched out her hands to the kneeling knight and stared at him with eager eyes through the crimson-tinted, thickly-scented mist.

François gave a gasp of amazement and his heart jumped, for he seemed to see before him the very form and presence of Ambroise de Loré, dressed as she was wont to dress in the blend of blue and silver that she loved. It was plain that the lord of Beauvau felt as François felt, for on the instant he made to rise to his feet, but the hand of the white figure pressed on his shoulder and kept him in his place. And then she that seemed to be Ambroise, slipped her hand into her bosom and plucked something thence and cast it from her, so that it fell on the floor in front of the kneeling knight, and as she did so she said something, but couched in so low a voice that no knowledge of its

purpose came to the ears of François. And the lord of Beauvau reached out a fierce hand and caught at the object, whatever it was, and thereafter sprang to his feet, in spite of the restraining hand of his white companion, and made as if he would leap towards the woman. But the figure in black swung up its great sword in menace, and the woman swung back behind the curtains and vanished, and the figure in white kicked over the altar and the light flamed and faded, and in a moment all was darkness inside the room. Straightway François decided that he had seen and heard enough, and turning his back upon the hovel, he ran at the top of his speed along the way by which he had come.

There was very little doubt in the lad's mind as to the main meaning of the scene he had been witnessing. It was plain that somebody, for some reason, was making Messire de Beauvau the victim of a mystification. For François had known very well, after the first hearty gasp of astonishment, that the vision of Ambroise in blue and silver was not Ambroise at all, but the dancing-girl whom he had seen at the riverside fair, and whom he had played with when he and she were children. François had little doubt that the mystification was some dodge of that damned Burgundian's; what, exactly, François could not imagine, any more than he could guess at the identity of the Burgundian's partner in the queer buffoonery. All this François muttered to his mind as he sped, and it was not until he found himself in the habitable parts of Saumur again that he allowed his nimble feet to slacken their speed, and summoned his nimble wits to a conclave of speculation as to what exactly he should do. It was no business of his to undeceive the bamboozled knight of Beauvau. If he were such a simpleton in amours—here our François swelled his chest and plumed himself amazingly till he suddenly recollected that he was broken-hearted and sought to squeeze a tear—as to take a dancing girl, however fair and radiant, for the lady Ambroise, he deserved to be left to welter in the pool of his folly. But the question was how far the farce might affect Messire Robert and the lady Ambroise, and if it were his duty to inform them of

what he had witnessed. On due reflection he deemed that silence were the better part. He recognized that his story would sound scarcely credible; that in any case it would earn him the dangerous hostility of the lord of Beauvau —and François, with his world to make, was in no mood for fashioning enemies—and that as far as he could see, no possible harm or inconvenience to either Robert or Ambroise could come out of the whole silly mummery. Messire d'Estouteville was returning to Paris immediately. My lady Ambroise was returning to Paris immediately. Messire de Beauvau was returning to his estates in the south of Anjou, where he ruled as Seneschal of the King. The whole of the joyous rallying at Saumur under the ægis of good King René was being broken up; all that were concerned were riding in a day or two to different quarters of the card. It was probable that few out of all the multitude would ever meet again. All things considered, François felt inclined to keep this overseen and overheard secret of his to himself. It would be a mad unbelievable tale to tell and might plunge the teller into most uncomfortable difficulties. It is to be remembered that François was very young, and that he did not mind a joke at the expense of Messire de Beauvau. François decided to wait, at all events, till the morrow when he would try to find the Burgundian and Huguette and see what could be made of them. But though he sought all Saumur on the morrow he could find no trace of them, nor could any man help him in his search. This staggering absence of any witness as to the truth of his tale confirmed him in his resolution that the least said is the soonest mended, that a still tongue hints a wise head, and that, for the present, he would keep himself to himself on the subject of his night adventure.

CHAPTER XV

ALMA MATER

FRANÇOIS seemed to return to Paris from all the wonderworld of Saumur in a very commonplace and jogtrot fashion. His uncle and he did not travel this time in the retinue of a great lord. Messire Robert lingered to continue his wooing and to escort his heart's queen to Paris. The good Canon could not delay, so he and his nephew joined units with a homely company of burgesses that had done good business in Anjou, and journeyed together for the sake of their money-bags.

But to the distempered mind of François the splendour of the setting-forth seemed commonplace and jog-trot in comparison with the clouds of glory that enveloped the swinging-back. What a poor worm was that outward-bound he, when contrasted with the homing bird—the metaphor was mixed, but it pleased—who was privileged to sing with knowledge of the beauty of the lady Ambroise! His lips were seared with her innocent kisses, his eyes were dazzled by her loveliness; all his pulses were strung to a longing that he did not understand. Mystically he mused upon his fortunate misfortune, mystically he spun strands of verse that was partly pagan and partly saintly, and all circling round himself and his unhappy happiness. More than ever, as the miles between him and Paris city dwindled, did the call to the lettered life appeal.

In a word, that honey-gall, Angevin adventure left the lad in the case of the fellow in the classic fable, who was offered a choice of two paths. He was in such a distempered condition of spirit and substance, that he was most impressionably ready for all the good chances and all

the bad chances floating in the air. Those two angels, one of good, one of evil, that are imagined to pace with every human pilgrim, had equal poise just then for the command of his soul. What was most certain in the turmoil of his senses was that he wished to prove himself worthy to love so adorable a lady as Ambroise de Loré. This was all in favour of the good angel.

His honest uncle, as they journeyed homeward, took it upon himself to improve the occasion fairly often.

"You have seen, nephew," he would say, "something of the splendour and the pleasures that are the privilege of the great. To such splendour it is scarcely possible for you to attain, without the aid of a miracle; but to have a small share in such splendour, to nibble, as it were, at the edge of the cake, may well be given to you if you ply your book with assiduity. You stand on the threshold of the University. Will you walk on the path that leads to preferment in the Church, or will you tread the road that ends with the laurels of the Law?"

François eyed him in a twitter. Aspirations towards religion had stirred within him since Saumur and Ambroise had been left behind. In the cool of the cloister, in the calm of the cathedral, he might re-create his ruined life. But the fame of a jurist, the pride of a pleader, tempted too. In either issue he could prove himself worthy of Ambroise.

"Truly, uncle," answered François, with an air of great humility, which did not altogether represent his real opinion, "I am glad to think that you attach some value, prejudiced no doubt by your native kindness, to my poor merits. I believe, if I may say so without ostentation, that I have some small right to plume myself at least upon my zeal for learning and my eagerness to make for myself that honourable place in the world which would be worthy my kinship to you and your kindness to me. You may trust me to walk on the pathway of knowledge with prudence and discretion, and not to make a definite decision as to my vocation until my now immature judgment has finely ripened."

The good Canon listened to the glibness of the youthful

lips with a profound admiration for the prodigy that he had fostered.

"Nephew," he said, "you carry indeed an old head upon young shoulders. I have heard many a clerk and lawyer put a case with less discrimination of phrase and direction of argument than you have made use of in this very minute. Indeed and indeed, I consider myself fortunate to have been, with the favour of Heaven, instrumental in furnishing such a vessel for the service of the Church, or," he hastily added, as François shot him a slight glance of reproachful challenge, "of sharpening such a weapon for the service of the Law."

"Uncle," François answered, "I am uncertain as to my wish and hesitate to choose. How would it be if I were to enter the University with an open mind and see how the course of my studies affected me?"

The Canon surveyed his nephew with a regard in which approval and disapproval mingled. He had hoped that François would make no bones about electing for the Church. At the same time, he could not but admire the canniness of the proposed deliberation.

"My child," he said, "your caution is commendable. I pray that Heaven may favour your choice. For my own part, I have gained content and comfort from Mother Church, but it would not become me to deny the prizes that Themis has it in her power to award. At least, I rejoice to think that, with your wits and parts, you are ensured fortune and distinction in one or other of your possible callings."

François listened with satisfaction to his uncle's encomiums. He cordially agreed with all his commendations. He was cheerfully—so far as his wounded heart permitted him to entertain any spirit of cheer—confident that he would prove worthy of the opportunity that was presented to him by a University career. Also, he was confident that he would daily prove more worthy to worship in secret that angelic star which mortals called Ambroise, and to prepare for the great day when he, François Villon, at the head either of the Church or of the Law—it really did not, for

his purpose, matter which—would be able to approach her and reveal the secret of his life.

It was in this ecstatic condition of vanity, anguish and braggadocio that Master François prepared himself to enter the Garden of Knowledge as the poet of the poem he loved so well entered the Garden of the Rose.

He did not guess how inside that garden his spirit was to receive many illuminations. Already, as he hugged his passion in his heart, he thought himself an authority on life. He did not dream how fiercely his ignorance was to be brought home to him.

CHAPTER XVI

THE UNIVERSITY STUDENT

YOU cannot rightly understand the early career of Master François Villon without some clear appreciation of his surroundings, of the kind of city in which he lived his life, and the kind of life which he lived in that city. It is probable that the most part of readers of romance pay very little heed to the geography, topography, town-planning, country and suburbs of the scenes in which the persons, male and female, in whom for the moment they are interested, jig out and wring out their little comedies and tragedies. Placards adorn the theatre of their minds, and the largely painted words, "A Wood," "A Street," "A Palace," serve excellently to suggest to them the necessary environment.

But Master François was so very much a child of that Paris in which he was bred; its influence was so heavy upon him for good as for evil, from his start to his finish, that it were well to possess a picture of that fair and ancient city in which he moved.

Imagine a medieval city with its network of tortuous, narrow streets, its gabled roofs, its overhanging stories, its magnificence of carved beam and carved stone, its frequent display of rich and gaudy colouring, its broad effects of black and white, its open spaces, its stately palaces, its huddles of hovels, its well-nigh uncountable churches, a forest of spires and turrets and belfries against the day-long or nightlong sky. There is a mighty river spanned by ancient bridges, and some of these ancient bridges are as streets on arches, and carry ancient houses upon them. The city is a walled city, has been a walled city since the

days of Philip Augustus. Outside those time-honoured walls lies the open country, upon which already the trowel of the builder is encroaching, slicing the green spaces into sites of priory and convent, villa and hunting-box. Inside those walls lies Paris itself, an entity and yet tripartite. For the Paris of the fifteenth century, the Paris that was the playground of Master François Villon, was divided into three divisions that were not merely formal divisions. Those three divisions were labelled respectively The Town, The City and The University. There is no understanding of old Paris unless those three divisions are clearly understood. Until his return from Anjou the Town and the City had meant most to Master François. Now the third division was to loom largest, the University to appear the most important.

On the day that little François, with a drumming heart, prepared to place his first foot on the first rung of the ladder of fame and fortune—in other words, on the day when he was summoned by his destiny to add his insignificant personality to the swarming, sprawling multitudes that made up the population of the University—François was still a romantic youth, dreaming devotedly of Ambroise—albeit very respectfully, as the dedicated bride of another—and reading a wonder-future for himself in the clouds of evening and morning. Now the scarlet of the Cardinal, now the sable of the President, enticed him, and the readiness of his nimble disposition to consider desired objects as accredited possessions made it hard for him to realize that he was not already girt with the Ring of the Fisherman or gifted with the truncheon of the law. He took his career for granted, or rather his success in whichever career he might adopt, on the morning when he first set foot as a recognized student within the narrow paths, channels and alleys of the ant-heap that called itself the University of Paris.

Those early days of University life were uneventful enough, scarcely even to be called coloured with that quality of single colour which belongs to a night of summer that is not spangled by a single star. The place entertained him

much and terrified him just a little. The University made a strange contrast to the hilarious city of Saumur and its scintillating court. It had an awesome effect with its miles of narrow alleys and twisted streets overcraned by gaunt, dark houses, whose dirty stairways swarmed with the teachers of wisdom and the seekers after wisdom. It was a world of solemn and pompous pedagogues who walked as if the earth shook beneath their tread, of lean, ascetic professors with the fires of knowledge flaming in their eyes, of students, some ragged, unkempt and frowsy, some as trim as a pin and as sweet as syrup, some that were of neither extreme, but wore sober clothes and plodded thick-shod along the path to honours. The air of the place was noisy all day with voices and footsteps; voices droning out of open windows the words of erudite lectures, footsteps of scholars scurrying from one class-room to another, with their gowns tucked up for better speed. It was a babel of voices, too, for all the tongues of all the world seemed to be wagging in that queer, gaunt garden of learning.

Through that astonishing crowd François, thanks to his smallness and his slimness, slipped unheeded and very well content to be neglected. His mind was full of his high purpose to prove by his mental prowess, by his scholastic achievements, by his ultimate triumphs, that he was worthy to wear the colours of the fairest, most gracious, most radiant of ladies. So he attended his classes zealously, paid the most respectful attention to his lectures, plied his book assiduously and took notes of all the subjects he studied with a fervour which must, he felt, very soon result in his proving a paragon and a nonpareil of the humane sciences. He was always punctual for his earliest appointment; he was always the latest to shuffle out of the final hall of the day. In a word, he was a pattern of students, a model to all pupils, and one that bore himself so modestly withal that he never sought to call attention to his pains and labours, but was content with his own congratulation and encouragement and the sense that he was consecrating his existence to the honour of the loveliest of women.

At that period of his student life, in that mood of his

mind which the admiring would have called ecstatic and the derisive described as smug, the young student made and wished to make, but few friends. He had a bowing acquaintance with two or three youths in the neighbourhood of his own age, with whom he would sometimes join in converse in hurried intervals of leisure between class and class, or in such rare instances of time as when some proclaimed exposition failed to be delivered in consequence of the indisposition of the lecturer or other cause. With these intellectual pick-ups who seemed no less honestly priggish than himself, François was pleased occasionally to exchange opinions on profound points of Roman law or ecclesiastical dogma, but these conferences generally concluded upon no conclusion, and the parties to the colloquy would go their several ways with much wise nodding of the head. For the rest, François only quitted the University to return to the shelter of his uncle's roof, there to apply himself most zealously to his hot-house studies of the Fathers of the Church and the Masters of Byzantine law.

It is astonishing how long a comparatively normal youth will permit himself to exist as one who in a dream sees the ecstatic vision. Wrapped in an unnatural mood of idolatry that had its physical as well as its spiritual element, François drifted into the twilight regions of mysticism, and fostered busily the spirit which, in its influence of the soul upon the flesh, stamps the impressionable body with symbolic stigmata. François would never have been surprised to wake upon any morning to find the name of Ambroise pricked upon his bosom in punctures of blood. His imagination began to play him tricks. His senses reeled in their temple; fair and foolish hallucinations accompanied him along the grey, gaunt streets of the University. There were times when he could swear that he saw Ambroise de Loré herself standing by the lecture-table, a dazzling contrast to the adult rascal that harangued, and smiling encouragement upon the beatified youth who alone was privileged to behold her. When he slipped into some chapel to pray for strength to succeed in his studies, the saint he addressed would seem to him to take upon her the cor-

poreal form which his verses had wooed for another man, and he gloried in his self-sacrifice and his suffering as if he were an anchorite.

It would be difficult to express, with fitness of imagery, the felicity which the good conduct of the novice conveyed to the heart of the Canon of St. Benoît in his comfortable dwelling of the Red Gate, and to Mother Villon in her humble lodging by the Church of the Celestines. While the ecclesiastic rejoiced over the manner in which his adopted charge was fulfilling his fondest hopes, the woman permitted herself to dream the most extravagant dreams as to the future of her son, and for the life of her she could not make up her mind whether she wished most to see him in the crimson of the Church or the ermine of the Law. If either the man or the woman could have guessed at the reason which made François so persistent a walker in the straight and narrow way, they would have been grievously dashed and disconcerted. But the pair of them, taking life at its face-value, assumed that their François was realizing their wishes just because he strove to realize their wishes, and they would alike have been shocked and horrified if they could have guessed at the preposterous folly which dominated him and guided him in his studious mood.

It is open to speculation how long this exemplary conduct of François might have persisted if it had not been encouraged by frequent sight of the beloved object and the less frequent privilege of speech with her. Such good fortune arose thus wise. When Messire Robert d'Estouteville returned to Paris, he brought with him, being a kind-hearted giant, a lively recollection of the service that had been rendered to him by his whilom page and poet. It is no more than justice to the knight to be sure that he would have cherished this sense of gratitude—an emotion unusual in the great towards the lowly—and taken generous action upon it, even if he had not reflected that in Paris, as well as in Saumur, his wooing was like to profit by a continuation of verse offerings. At least, Messire Robert very certainly did let Canon Guillaume know, when that good man first waited upon him after his return, that his young

nephew would be a welcome visitor at Messire Robert's abode. Furthermore, it was, thanks to Messire Robert's influence with the Provost of Paris, that was soon to be his father-in-law, Messire Ambroise de Loré, that the lad was assured a welcome in the Provost's palace as well, and was permitted to pay his respects to the great official on those stated days when the Provost kept open house for his friends. This second privilege François valued far more highly than the former, though he was sensible enough not to say as much to his gigantic patron.

François took youth's cheerful advantage of the opportunity thus offered to him by Providence working through the amiability of Messire d'Estouteville. Much of the leisure he could steal from his University he passed either in his chamber of the Red Gate, writing rhymes for his patron, or in attending the levees of the Provost of Paris, in the hope, that was often satisfied, of a measure of speech with the lady of his dreams. For still, as in the old, sweet Saumur manner, Messire Robert made François his carrier of verses, and whenever he had a ballade or a rondeau to present, François made bold to push through any circle of dignitaries, however brilliant, that girdled Ambroise, confident in the welcome that he always won. It was in this manner that François managed to rub shoulders with quite a number of distinguished personages and even to scrape acquaintance, here and there, with the bearers of distinguished names. The good Canon rubbed congratulatory hands over the social progress that his nephew was a-making, a social progress which, taken in conjunction with his scholastic progress, seemed to promise the highest of triumphs. "Ah," the good Canon would say to himself, in moments of digestive meditation after a comfortable meal, "the lad has a knack of attainment, the lad will get on, the lad will be worthy of my pains." And the good Canon would dream of a serene old age, screened and buttressed by the successes of his nephew.

As the days waxed and waned, if they did not add perceptibly to the girth or the stature of François, they served, in luring him along to manhood, to fan his unhappy pas-

sion. If it were scarcely a sane passion—being no better than an arabesque traced in the brain of a boy who was unlucky enough to be also a poet—it was in its essence blameless, all conceived and nourished in a rage of exaltation that ruled his life with a delicious delirium. He fashioned a kind of religion of it, as other and older devout lovers have done, and if he were Christian enough in his spirit of humility, he had a pagan side to his fancy which delighted to offer sacrifices of one kind or another on the altar of the goddess. He had been a heedless youth enough, but now it was touching to see his solicitude for man and beast. He rescued a baited dog from a huddle of louts, and the name of Ambroise was the balsam that soothed and salved the hurts he sustained in the enterprise. Then an old woman that sold apples at the corner of a street had her little tray of wares overturned by a careless passer-by. The passer-by went his ways, but Villon being nigh, darted forward, and chasing the rolling globes, restored them to the distressed saleswoman. She gave him a grateful speech—"Oh, sir, you are good!"—and a grateful glance which François remembered and cherished for many a long day.

And so, for a season François led a well-kept life, and moved, in a sense, in excellent society. Another, more capable of accommodating his humours to the allurements of fortune, would have found an open market for his wits and thriven accordingly. But to foolish François all those notables with whom he came in contact, those magistrates, and prelates and soldiers and nobles, were, as who should say, no better than so many effigies ranged around the sacrosanct altar only to be considered of interest, because they, like him, represented a votive offering at the shrine. His uncle, who knew nothing of this, chuckled over what he considered to be the not merely pardonable but approvable worldliness which was astonishing in so young a man. His mother, who knew nothing of this, surveyed her son with a reverence akin to that she must have experienced, if she had beheld him bodily and visibly translated to Heaven and moving at his familiar ease in the company of the blessed saints and angels. Nobody else in the whole

wide world of Paris thought a serious thought about the boy. To Messire Robert he was still the versatile imp. To Ambroise he was still the intelligent messenger of another's dear meaning. To the great folk who thronged the halls of the Knight and the Provost he was of no account at all. He was there: well and good. He was not there: well and good. It made no difference. How should it?

Here was François outwardly on the highway to fat affluence and inwardly love's martyr, racked with all manner of transports and tremors, of which he dared make no sign. And so the days filled the sails of the weeks and the weeks bellied into months, and still Messire Robert was a bachelor and Ambroise de Loré a spinster, and their smiling cupid carried a heart that was half gold and half lead with the alchemy of romance. He began to take it for granted that so bitter-sweet a state must needs endure for ever, making the world a kind of tragic paradise. There were reasons in plenty for this lingering courtship though François never sought to learn them. None of the players in the pretty game was in a hurry to end it. Ambroise de Loré liked to toy a little longer with her liberty and the freedom of her innocent smiles. Messire Robert was deep enough in love, but too easy and simple to let his feelings weaken into lovesickness or wanton on to impatience, and whatever the lady Ambroise wished, he—now that he felt sure of her—wished too. But the chief cause of the delay was due to Ambroise de Loré, man and father. His plan was that his future son-in-law should succeed him in the Provostship of Paris; that the office should be, as it were, his wedding-present to the happy pair; yet at the same time he felt a regret at relinquishing the place and power which he had held so long which tempted him to extend his tenure for another year.

CHAPTER XVII

THE BEDEVILMENT OF BEAUVAU

THERE floated indeed a temporary cloud over the sky of this pre-nuptial felicity. This came about when Messire de Beauvau paid a visit to Paris on some errand of his King. He waited upon the lady Ambroise in her father's house, and took the first occasion of solitude in her company to press his suit. The lady Ambroise duly replied, with such maidenly quickness of colour as became the occasion, that she was betrothed to the lord of Estouteville and would very shortly be his wife. To her surprise, Messire de Beauvau met this innocent statement with a vehemence of reproach in which such terms as fickle, false, changeable and double-dealing were freely used. The young lady passed from amazement to indignation and from indignation to perplexity, for she soon perceived that the lord of Beauvau was very much in earnest, and said the strange things he did say with patent sincerity. When he taxed her with the meeting in the lonely house in Saumur by the gibbet, she stared at him with so honest an astonishment as would have convinced him if he did not carry in his pouch evidence that must convict the maid of her faithlessness. From his pouch he incontinently plucked a pendant set with precious stones that spelled her name, and proffering it on the palm of his hand to her gaze, asked her if she had ever seen that trinket before.

Ambroise eyed the toy with a look of recognition.

"Very truly I have seen it before," she admitted, "for it was mine, and gave it as a gift to one that served me well."

"I am glad you say so," Messire de Beauvau agreed,

"for you gave it as a gift to me, lady, on the night before you left Saumur, in the house by the gallows square."

Ambroise could scarcely refrain from laughing, as she gaped at Messire de Beauvau's angry face.

"I gave that ring," she said, "to little François Villon, that was then my lord's page, because he had been a fetch and carry for my lord and deserved a guerdon. Pray, how did it come into your hands?"

"It came into my hands from your hands," Messire de Beauvau responded doggedly; but he was beginning to be a little disturbed by the steadfastness and emphasis of Ambroise. Ambroise smiled and shook her head.

"I ought to be very angry," she protested, "to think that you could believe me so unmaidenly as it is plain you have believed me."

"Nay, lady," said Messire de Beauvau, "there is nothing unmaidenly in loving a true man and telling him that he has your heart, though your hand may be reluctantly plighted to another."

"But I had not given you my heart," Ambroise retorted sharply, for she was getting tired of the argument; "and my hand was not given reluctantly to Messire d'Estouteville, but very freely and fully and with all gladness of delivery."

She spoke thus so frankly and simply, with such an earnestness of enthusiasm for her groom that was to be, that poor Messire de Beauvau was gravely shaken in his conviction. But then he told himself that he could not be mistaken. The scene in the hovel was too real; the vision of Ambroise too convincing to be banished by any denial, however emphatic. "By the blessed name of Our Lady," he asseverated, "I saw you on that night in Saumur if I ever saw woman, and you gave me that gewgaw which you admit to be your own jewel."

"I admit that it is my own jewel," replied Ambroise, "but I gave it to a lad of no account save that he was in my lord's service, and was therefore welcome to me and worthy of some small gift. But that same lad is in Paris and shall be sent for, and it may be you will believe him if you will not

believe me. And I promise you I shall say no word of all this to my dear lord, for, as he is of a choleric disposition, he might take umbrage, to your ill-luck."

Messire de Beauvau felt and looked excessively annoyed at the suggestion in the lady's words.

"I entreat you to believe," he said proudly, "that I go in no fear of Messire d'Estouteville, and though I cheerfully concede him to be a good and gallant knight, I cannot for a moment admit that he is in any wise a better man than myself. If the foul fiend has had a hand in this business I am not to blame; but so far as my human senses could serve me, I believed that I spoke to you that night and that you gave me this token."

"My lord," said Ambroise coldly, "I think less well of you than I did because you have presumed to think less well of me than our friendship should have permitted. But we must beat this business out of the bush for both our sakes, and so with your good leave, I will send for this youth here and now, and you will wait here till he comes, so that you shall not think that I have any private speech with him wherein I might prime him with the tale I would wish him to tell."

The lord of Beauvau was all for protesting hotly that there was not and never could be any such thought in his mind. But Ambroise paid him little heed. She summoned a servant and bade him go with all dispatch to Canon Villon's house of the Red Gate, and thence to bring the lad François, if he were within, or if he were abroad, to seek him at the University.

It so happened that François was within doors when the summons came to the Red Gate, and so it was not very long before he arrived, with a beating heart, at the provost's house. He was surprised, and showed it, to find the lord of Beauvau in company with the lady Ambroise, if two human beings can happily be said to be in company who stand at the opposite ends of a long room and change no word with one another.

The moment François entered Ambroise advanced towards him, exposing something on her open, extended palm.

"If you know anything of this trinket," she commanded, "say now what you know."

François picked the pretty jewel from her palm and gave a cry of delight.

"Why, Madonna," he said, "this is the pendant that you gave me a while ago and made me happy in the gift. And then by unkind chance I lost it and became unhappy. How has it come back to you, and is it to come back to me?"

The lady Ambroise looked from the lad towards Messire de Beauvau and there was a frown on her face.

"You hear what this youth says," she asked, and then she turned to François again. "My lord of Beauvau will have it that this pendant, which you say, as I say, that I gave to you, was rather, in very truth, delivered to him by me at Saumur in a place I never saw and never heard of until this hour."

François drew a long breath.

"Dear lady," he said, "my lord has been deceived, and misled; yet it is not strange that he has been persuaded to think a wild thought. For it so happens that I know something of this strange matter, and can do something to set a crooked story straight."

Messire de Beauvau came from the window where he had stood in a cold silence, staring into the street.

"Who are you, boy?" he questioned sternly. "I do not think that I have ever seen you before."

"My lord," said François respectfully, "you would scarcely have noted me, but I was in Saumur in the spring of the past year, and while there I had the honour to serve for a time as page to Messire Robert d'Estouteville, and it was part of my service to bear letters to my lady here present, and my lady was pleased in her graciousness to give me this gift."

"Then how," asked the knight sternly, "has it chanced that so precious a gift has come into my possession?"

Ambroise said nothing, but her eyes, fixed on the flushed face of François, repeated the same question.

"My lord," said François slowly, "perhaps I may help

to answer that question if I am permitted, by your favour, to ask you a question. Did this pendant come into your possession on a certain night in Saumur in a certain house by the gallows square?"

Messire de Beauvau looked rather foolish; then he looked rather angry.

"What do you know of that matter?" he asked sharply.

François made a gesture of respectful protest.

"An idle curiosity," he said, "led me to follow your lordship's footsteps. Your course led me to a strange part of the town, where, indeed, I feared that your lordship might be in possible danger."

Messire de Beauvau laughed a little scornfully, but François waited patiently till he had made an end of mirth and then continued his tale.

"Wherefore," he went on, "the window being open, I made myself a peephole, and I saw that a woman gave something to you under certain conditions of secrecy and mystery.

"And he maintains that the woman was I," Ambroise cried hotly, "and that I gave him yonder gift."

"My lord might very well have believed as much," François continued, "for, indeed, I myself should almost have believed as much, if I had not known to the contrary."

Ambroise gave a gasp of surprise and clasped her hands together. She spoke no word, but stared in wonder at the lad. Messire de Beauvau spoke—and spoke bitterly.

"What in the devil's name," he asked, "do you mean by this knowledge of yours? Will you tell me that I did not see the lady Ambroise, and that she did not give me this token, or will you assert that I was worked upon by magic?"

"Very surely," François replied, "you did not see the lady Ambroise that night, for I had but just left her presence after bearing her a message from my lord. Yet you were not worked upon by magic, but by a trick which I could see through. The woman you saw that night is well-nigh as like as my lady Ambroise as one tear is like another; nevertheless, it was not my lady, but a dancing-girl, whom

I used to play with when she and I were both little children, and whom I had lost sight of for many years, until I saw her by chance at the fair in Saumur."

Messire de Beauvau looked puzzled and suspicious.

"This is a strange story," he said sourly, and shot a swift glance from François to Ambroise, as if in some way he suspected the pair of having concocted the tale between them. François caught the glance and resented it; yet he felt that the tale he told was strange enough to justify incredulity.

"May I ask your lordship," he said, "how it came about that you visited that house that night? Were you persuaded there by a ruffian of Burgundy?"

"The fellow that persuaded me there," said Messire de Beauvau, "did not look what you would call a ruffian, and did not speak like a Burgundian. He was a clerkly-seeming fellow in shabby black, with a face like a bad cheese."

François struck his hands together in his excitement at the illumination which came with Messire de Beauvau's words.

"I know the fellow your lordship describes," he cried, "and I can read the riddle of the gift. He is a fellow named Sermois that was a kind of serving-man to the Canon Anselm Pommier."

Messire de Beauvau frowned; Ambroise stared wide-eyed.

"How," asked the knight, "did this Canon's clerk come to have your jewel, and why should he play so gross a trick upon me?"

"That is a plain tale," said François. "This fellow and I had a quarrel which was followed by a fight. After the scuffle I found that I had lost my jewel, which he, no doubt, secured. He cherished a grievous grudge against Messire Robert because Messire Robert handled him roughly when he was seeking to throttle me, and this, I take it, was his way of revenge."

Messire de Beauvau stood staring sullenly before him. It was plain that he had been made a fool of in the past, if he were not being made a fool of in the present, and he

resented the fact very savagely. Ambroise seemed to guess his thoughts.

"My lord," she said gently, "indeed you can believe this youth, whom I have always known to be simple and honourable and worthy to serve so good a knight as my lord of Estouteville. And also, indeed, you can believe me when I assure you that I never saw you anywhere in secret and never gave you this trinket."

Messire de Beauvau bowed his head in silence. Ambroise turned her eager face to François.

"Tell me," she said, "was this damsel that you saw so strangely like me as to deceive one that knew me well?"

"She is exceedingly like you," François answered. "It may be that she would not so deceive if it were clear daylight and you were standing by. But she is like enough to pass for you under any cunning conditions of light. I had always wondered what it was that your ladyship's face seemed to recall to me, and when I saw this girl that day at the Saumur fair I knew at once who she was and what the memories were that had troubled me."

"If this girl," said Messire de Beauvau suspiciously, "were an old playmate of yours, why did you not seek to renew friendship with her when you came across her so oddly?"

"My lord," said François, "I did desire to do so, but on the very heel of my discovery of her came my quarrel with this Sermois, and thereafter my strife with him. And when that was over and done with, though I sought all over Saumur, I could find no trace of the girl. It may very well be that this villain Sermois saw the likeness that I saw, and persuaded the girl and her master to keep dark for his own purposes."

"Now, by Our Lady," cried Messire de Beauvau, "if this story of yours be true——"

François hotly interrupted him, with a face as red as a ripe apple.

"My story is true," he cried. "How could I speak a false word in the presence of my lady?"

Messire de Beauvau frowned upon the youth's impudence in venturing thus to assert himself in the presence of his

betters; but Ambroise interceded for him very prettily, pledging her own faith for his, and the frown lifted a little from the brow of the bewildered and angry gentleman.

"Since your tale is true," he resumed, "I shall give this fellow who has misled me and flouted this lady, reason to be sorry for his folly if ever he comes in my way again. But this woman you speak of, who bears so strange a likeness to the lady Ambroise, have you any knowledge of what has become of her or where she may be found?"

François shook his head.

"I have neither knowledge nor guess," he protested. "Save for those two glimpses at Saumur I have not seen her since I was a little child."

There was little more to be said thereafter. François was dismissed very graciously on the part of the lady Ambroise, who was now more than ever grateful to him, and with less cordiality by the lord of Beauvau, who still seemed to be plodding in a slough of doubt and distraction. The lad returned to the Red Gate more surely convinced than ever that life was an amazing game, governed by the strangest chances and oddest coincidences. The knight took his leave with a surging heart, a burning head and twitching fingers. Alternately he cursed his folly for having been so easily deceived, or wondered if he had been indeed deceived, and if the dupery were not to be found in the later explanation. Behind all these doubts there lurked a very fierce longing to lay his hands upon the rascal who, as now seemed possible, had made a fool of him. For Messire de Beauvau had a sensitive conceit that was easily pricked into an angry rash. He had a right to be conceited, for he was a gentleman of great gifts, but he wanted to be invincible and infallible, the which favours are not granted to mortals.

Messire de Beauvau's intervention had three results. It made him keen to return to Saumur and seek out Canon Anselm's clerk. It made the affection that Ambroise already cherished for Messire Robert greatly increase with this unexpected menace to her happiness. It made François more convinced than ever that Ambroise de Loré was the most perfect being that Providence had ever permitted,

or a time, to taste mortality and he the happiest of unhappy men in being her secret worshipper.

Messire de Beauvau, his business in Paris dispatched, returned with all speed to Anjou, and as soon as he had reported himself to King René and acquitted himself of his commission, he greatly astonished Canon Anselm by flaming like the sun into the cool grey of his Canonage. But when the Canon had learned Messire de Beauvau's business, he could afford Messire no satisfaction. He had, indeed, at the time of the tournament, under his roof a youth named Philippe Sermois, who did indeed correspond pretty closely with the description given by the Seneschal. He had afforded bed and board to that youth for charitable reasons, with which it was not necessary to trouble his lordship. But Philippe Sermois had taken Dutch leave of him long since, even, as it seemed, in the haste of his departure taking with him, no doubt by mistake, certain coins and other trifles of value belonging to the Canon.

The worthy Canon hoped that if he had taken these things intentionally, he had done so from no felonious purpose, but with the desire of having about him some memorials of one who had been his benefactor. But the old Canon assured Messire de Beauvau, who was beginning to show some signs of impatience at the old scholar's verbosity, that he had not the faintest idea where Philippe Sermois had gone, and could not suggest the slenderest clue by which he might be traced. Whereat Messire de Beauvau, swallowing his irritation out of respect for an excellent if somewhat long-winded, ecclesiastic, thanked him civilly and forbore to swear until he was well outside the Canonage. Clearly there was nothing he could do, and he did it as resignedly as might be.

Ambroise de Loré, for her part, was infinitely more gracious and tender to Messire Robert than she had hitherto chosen to show herself. She had been pleased to amuse herself with the sport which she called teasing her giant, and part of the process of this teasing was to postpone, on one pretext or another, the celebration of marriage with her chosen spouse. But now in her anger and alarm at

her threatened future, she allowed herself to avow the amiability she had concealed, and to agree very readily when Messire Robert, encouraged by such a display of affability, proposed the naming of a speedy date for the nuptials.

To François the episode brought a fresh intensity to the clarified mood, brooded over by an unrealizable ambition and filliped by an attenuated and unrecognized sensuality which had governed him for a stretch of time which must not be called unhappy. He lived for a little longer in the kingdom of dreams, assuming a belief in ideals beyond the compass of his reason, and imagining himself to be fitted to play parts on the stage of life which were absolutely forbidden to his native and flamboyant mimicry. But if, for a season, he had imprisoned his whimsical spirit within the sphere of a celestially-tinted soap-bubble, that bubble was destined to be broken and its frail filaments to make no less noise in the prisoner's ears than the shattering of a house of steel.

The catastrophe came with the news, long expected, dreaded and ignored, that Ambroise de Loré was very presently to be married to my lord Robert of Estouteville. Although François had known from the beginning that such was to be indeed the inevitable end of the love-traffic that he had fostered in the pleasant land of Anjou, the fulfilment of his knowledge dealt him a staggering blow. For all his cloistered collegiate life he had grown older swiftly, as youth of his season does, and because he was not able to dissolve his own folly with a smile, he realized, with a fierce acuteness, the despair that waited for him behind the torches of the coming nuptials.

CHAPTER XVIII

A LECTURE IN HALL

MASTER FRANÇOIS paid his respects to my lord, paid his respects to my lady. He penned for Messire Robert a final effort in the form of an epithalamium which, unhappily, has not been preserved. In this, which as he assured himself, was written with the blood of his heart and the tears of his soul, he taxed all his memories of those masters, the ancient balladists, to express the raptures which Messire Robert must needs feel at the thought of approaching union with the incomparable Ambroise de Loré. Gods and goddesses danced sarabands and fandangos in those staggering verses; stars, roses, jewels were strewn before the maiden's twinkling feet; the nymphs, the graces, the muses, the dryads hurtled to make a company and escort for the bride on her pilgrimage to the temple of the benign Venus, patroness of lawful loves. And while he wrote his impassioned lines—which Messire Robert did not understand in the least, and which Ambroise de Loré assured Messire Robert were sweetly pretty—the poor little poet told himself that the wounds in his heart were being seared by his rhymes, and that henceforward the word love, save as a hallowed and tragic memory, would have no meaning whatever for him.

At last broke the fatal, fateful dawning of the day that was to make Ambroise de Loré the bride and wife of Messire Robert d'Estouteville. François, with the full consent of his excellent uncle, was permitted to grant himself a holiday for the morning from his studies, that he might attend the ceremony of marriage at Notre Dame. François did attend it, and prided himself—quite in the manner of the Spartan with the fox—on the smiling countenance

he carried and with which he contrived to mask the anguish of his breaking heart. But when all was over; when he had sipped with a choking gullet the wine, and swallowed with a protesting stomach the cake of the wedding feast, he left the splendid mansion—his departure quite unnoticed—and returned to the University in a condition of mind and body which he described to himself as annihilating.

He wandered in the narrow streets as one in a dream. He entered, in a state of semi-consciousness, the hall, where he dimly remembered that a much-talked-of new-comer from Germany was due to deliver a lecture on Philosophy. François was early and the hall was almost empty. He seated himself on a vacant bench, where he at once dropped into a brown study which had nothing whatever to do with philosophy. He forgot the place, the occasion, the lecture and the lecturer in a dream of the loved and lost.

Absorbed in his thoughts, he scarcely heeded how the hall began to be occupied, how the benches steadily filled. With his arms folded upon his breast and his chin almost resting upon them, he meditated into complete oblivion of the place where he was and the reason why he came thither. He had been told by more than one of his few University acquaintances that a learned travelling student, lately from Leipzig, was making some noise with a series of addresses on philosophy which had been heard and approved by the heads of the University and which he was now privileged to address to the students of the various Nations in their various quarters. Villon had promised to attend, on the instances of his informants, and now, half consciously, he was keeping his promise to the letter, if not exactly in the spirit. For the spirit was far away, in a Lubberland of nonsensical, impossible dreams. Wrapped in his fancies, he did not heed the entrance of the lecturer, and the words that the lecturer uttered had no meaning nor sound to his indifferent ears. Had he been pleased to listen to the polished Latin its matter might have moved his curiosity. For the speaker followed a singular method in his address. His was a not uningenious method of making the worse appear the better reason.

All around François, where he drowsed and nodded, students of every age and status listened and laughed while the lecturer harangued. The speaker's method was ironic, sardonic, enigmatic. His speech was a kind of porridge, with paradoxes for plums, and his pudding was richly fruited. Morality and the humanities made his theme, but under his cunning care they were metaphosed out of all knowledge. He had a clever trick of bringing forward specious, ingenious and dryly humorous arguments in favour of the seven deadly sins, and then when his hearers were gaping with wonder how he would refute the words of those whom he compared with the ungodly in the Wisdom of Solomon, "Who say, but not aright," he would bring up against his flashing battalions of Devil's advocates some cheap little religious phrase, some obvious commonplace of doctrine, some such trite aphorism as would form the polemical stock-in-trade of an ignorant village priest. He would launch this poor little piece of meagre theology as Jove might hurl the thunderbolt, and then he would fold his arms and survey his audience with an expression that was meant to say: "Behold I have annihilated the sophistries of the ungodly." But he left those who listened to him more impressed by the good case for the goats than by the belated refutation of the sheep.

François, however, heard nothing of the discourse. He was not very sure, later, whether during the term of his reverie he was really awake or asleep. His mind, indeed, was travelling over the past, but it may very well have been that it so travelled in slumber. He was in Saumur again, blithe with spring and festivity. He saw his beloved lady, Ambroise de Loré, as he had first beheld her. From merely dreaming he drifted into an effort of composition. Fragments of a ballade in her honour floated fitfully before his fancy; the thing was to pull them all together and pin them into shape. He was so busy with this pleasing occupation that he forgot all about the lecture and the lecturer and the class, and let the dull voice drone on unheeded while he spun the web of his fancy.

He was so steeped in such a pleasing mist of suave rev-

erie that he did not become aware that the droning voice had stopped and that the monotonous iteration had been succeeded by the blankest of blank silences. Suddenly that blank silence was shattered by a strident inquiry:

"You, sir, you in the corner there, nursing your chin, what is your opinion as to the proposition I have placed before you?"

François, roused from his pleasant meditations by the harshness of the voice, shook himself out of his lethargy and looked about him to see whom the lecturer might be addressing. To his astonishment and discomfiture he found the eyes of every student in the company were fixed upon him with an expression of intense, if suppressed, amusement, and that the lecturer was glaring at him with the amiable expression of a blended basilisk and cockatrice.

As he saw the face of the speaker, François hoped that he might still be asleep and his surroundings no more than the furniture of an evil dream. For he found, to his horror, that the face of the speaker was hatefully familiar to him with its compelled impassiveness; that the voice of the speaker was hatefully familiar to him with its measured deliberation; that both were the face and voice of Philippe Sermois.

For the moment François felt that he could scarcely breathe. All the old dread which Sermois had it in his power to inspire came back upon him with a sickening rush. As he shivered at this reappearance of a personality that had almost passed from his thoughts he recalled, with a falling heart, every incident of that fight in the garden, in which François had been brought face to face with overmastering strength and relentless cruelty.

He shut his eyes for a moment and opened them again, and found that very surely he was not asleep. There, on the dais, stood Philippe Sermois, with folded arms, gazing at him with an inscrutable countenance, and expressionless eyes that gave no hint of the pleasure that the perturbation of François afforded him. And in every part of the hall students were turning on their benches and craning to get a sight of François where he sat.

Villon gaped weakly at Sermois and racked his brains to try and recollect a single syllable that he had uttered. But it was all in vain and a waste of pains. The words had flowed round him in his torpor, without making any impression on his self-absorption; he had lain in them as a man lies in a pool of a summer's day and is scarcely aware that he is bathing. So François was sadly at a loss, for an offended lecturer might complain to authority, and authority might make things unpleasant for the offender. Also, it was abashing to be rated or held up to ridicule before a hall-full of staring folk, who would only be entertained to see him baited.

At this moment a fellow-student, that sat just behind Villon, stooped as if to tie his shoe, so that he was wholly hidden from the gaze of the lecturer by the breadth of Villon's back, narrow though that breadth might be, and into Villon's ear there came a sound so attenuated that it seemed as if it were the very ghost of a whisper, and that spectral whisper breathed three words. Those three words were: "PLEASURE SUPERIOR VIRTUE."

François gave a gasp, first of relief and then of apprehension. Relief, if the hint were a creditable finger-post. Apprehension, lest it should be no better than a snare spread by malice for his further undoing. He had to make up his mind in a hurry, and he chose to believe in the finger-post. If he blundered, he would scarcely be in a worse case than that in which he sat. So he put a bold face upon it, summoned his voice from the pit of his stomach, to which it seemed to have fled in a hurry, and facing Sermois with a stare as steady as he could command, he spoke:

"Master, you were speaking words of wisdom touching the proportions of the consideration to be accorded to the two great impulses of Pleasure and Virtue."

He saw, by the slightly foiled expression of Sermois, that he was, at least in some degree, upon the right tack. In the buzz of surprise that followed, François was able to catch a further whisper softly reaching his ear from behind.

"And what," asked Sermois sharply, "was the conclu-

sion to which my humble intelligence permitted itself to arrive?"

He was not in the least humble: Villon saw that at a glance. So far he was changed from the Saumur days that he now showed swollen with pride and arrogance. Villon, still trusting to the finger-post, spoke again. You are to understand, of course, that this conversation was carried on in the colloquial Latin, which was the medium of scholastic speech in the University.

"Master," he answered, "you were expounding, with a clarity of thought, a felicity of phrase, and a lucidity of language the astonishing supremacy of the quality of Pleasure over the quality of Virtue."

Now this was exactly what Sermois had been maintaining in one of those paradoxes in which he delighted. He had painted, with a caustic eloquence, the grim attributes of Virtue, its attenuations and renunciations; he had presented a florid picture of the appurtenances of Pleasure, its opulent joys and wantonnesses, till many of his hearers were all on fire for the gratifications of the flesh. Behind François the whispering voice delivered its message very gently. It seemed to François that the speaker could do little more than shape the words with his lips, but for all that, their meaning reached him.

Villon saw his advantage, and pressed it.

"If I seemed," he said modestly, "to be at all lost in thought, it was because I was ruminating on how anyone, at any time, could possibly have conceived that Virtue was in any sense the worldly equivalent of Pleasure. But my doubts were dissipated for ever, both for this present time and for the future, by the eloquence of your worshipful words and the cogency of your worshipful logic, showing, as they did, that Pleasure was superior to Virtue, because true Pleasure was the highest form of Virtue."

François prattled away glibly enough, for his native impudence had returned to him with his first sense of being on sure ground. His dread of Sermois had lessened with the sound of his own voice. Sermois eyed him something sourly. He was not deceived by Villon's assurance, but

also he was not willing to give Villon opportunity for further eminence in the eyes of the class. So he only uttered a "Humph" gruffly, and continued a discourse of which you may be sure that Villon did not miss a single word.

CHAPTER XIX

BIRDS OF PREY

WHEN the lecture came to an end—for even the longest and most paradoxical lecture has its limit—with the first stir of dispersal, Villon turned swiftly round in the hope to discover the student who had come so timeous to his aid. Instantly he found himself looking full into the face of a youth whom, because he was undoubtedly several years older than himself, Villon was inclined to regard as an elder, but whom he was prompt to estimate as one of the handsomest men he had ever beheld. François was still of an age when the beauty of a youth had a charm scarcely less potent than the beauty of a maid, and he flushed with pleasure.

"Was it you—" he began hesitatingly, anxious to express his thanks, but suddenly bashful again in the presence of this gracious elder.

The good-looking student smiled, showing a fine set of sharp, white teeth, and his eyes danced in a very likeable manner.

"*Amicus Virtus, magis amicus Felicitas,*" he said, with a light, easy laugh. The remark was not exactly apt, but the way it was said made it seem delightfully pertinent, and, after all, as François reflected later, it did carry an allusion. The student extended a hand which François clasped with gratitude.

"Let us foregather," the comely youth continued. "There is a tavern hard by which I could spend hours in praising, but it is better to let it speak for itself."

He turned slightly and laid a hand upon the shoulder of a student that had sat beside him.

"What say you, bully swinker?" he questioned, and, as the man thus addressed nodded his round head, the comely youth again turned to Villon. "What is your name, O dreamer of dreams?" he asked. Villon gave it.

"My name," said the youth, "is René de Montigny, and that of my comrade here is Guy Tabarie."

Thus came about the fateful meeting which was to link those three lives together.

Villon, in his gratitude, was willing enough to agree to René de Montigny's proposal. Furthermore, he felt that he could scarcely do less, under the circumstances, than play the part of host. He made the offer the more easily because his uncle had presented him with a couple of silver pieces that morning. He had, indeed, intended to carry those same silver pieces to his mother, but he consoled himself for not doing so by reflecting that, as the poor woman had never known of his intention, she was really suffering no loss.

René de Montigny made a faint and deliberately ineffective protest, for form's sake, while he jingled a key or two as if he carried India in his pocket. Guy Tabarie made no protest whatever. If a man offered to pay for his drink, Guy Tabarie took it that the man knew his mind and acted accordingly. So the point was soon decided, and in a few minutes Villon found himself at a dirty table in the corner of a dark room, sharing the wine which Montigny had ordered and for which Villon was to pay. While waiting, Villon's ever alert curiosity took occasion to study the countenances and carriage of his new acquaintance and to make such attempt as inexperience permitted to appraise them.

He had never, to his knowledge, seen either of the pair before; and, indeed they, being both considerably older than he, belonged to a grade in the ranges of the University to which only his zeal in the pursuit of science had promoted him. If he had carried their newly-gained names to any of the heads of College he would have learned much of the pair, but nothing to their credit. Neither of them had evinced any great zeal in the acquirement of polite

learning. Both had displayed an almost uncanny alertness in acquiring that command of lusts and infamies which was termed then, as it had been termed before and has been termed since, knowledge of the world. François was not astute enough to read so much in the countenances of his new companions; but he was sufficiently alert to see how different those countenances were, and to deduce therefrom something of the temperaments that lay behind them.

Guy Tabarie was favoured with a face which, in extreme youth, had been pronounced seraphic and in manhood still deserved the epithet cherubic. Indeed, it only needed the amplification of a pair of large ears into a pair of larger wings to serve very handsomely as a model for a conventional headstone. The fellow's rounded cheeks, merry mouth, and engaging eyes inspired confidence. Strangers were prepared to declare him the best fellow in the world before they had been five minutes in his company.

As a matter of fact, no greater rogue—in his especial class—than Guy Tabarie lived and moved at that hour in Paris. His fingers truly were clean of blood—the only particular, indeed, in which they were clean—because he had not so much heroism in his body as could spur him to the enterprise of stabbing a man in the dark. Guy Tabarie's knaveries were of the kind to be executed in comfort, and, as far as possible, in safety. He had no zest for offences which brought him within the shadow of the gallows. He would have liked to know that he sinned with impunity.

René de Montigny belonged to another pole of humanity. He had Italian blood in his veins, and he looked more Italian than he was. He made, therefore, a most astonishing contrast to his companion. Guy Tabarie, with his apple cheeks and his yellow hair, seemed unquestionably Teutonic; René de Montigny had perfect features, dark eyes that suggested dreams of which their owner was entirely unconscious, an olive skin of too clear a quality to be libelled as sallow, a fine, lean figure, small feet and shapely hands. Dirtier than Tabarie's, Master René's hands carelessly carried a sanguine stain. He cherished no lust to

kill, but he had no theories as to the value of life in other people and no scruples of any kind. If wishing had been having René de Montigny would never have sinned; but as wishing was not having and as René de Montigny wished for a great many things and always sought to gratify his wishes, it came about that he committed a good many sins, including that of blood-guiltiness, with a detached indifference which was the admiration of his friends. He had his way easily with a certain kind of woman, to whom he seemed like a living god; he could down-drink Tabarie without flushing his cheeks, and, for the most part, he was, like Tabarie, good-tempered. When he did lose his temper, he made an unpleasant companion, whom people of thrice his strength were solicitous to avoid. There never had been a hint of quarrel between Montigny and Tabarie. Their rascalities adjusted with an admirable niceness.

François had already seen too much of the world to feel embarrassment in strange company, but this was the strangest he had yet tasted and made him feel at once older and younger than his years. Haunted by his recent surprise, he began the tavern talk with a question.

"Pray," said he, "can you tell me who that same lecturer was from whose wrath you so dexterously defended me?"

"He is a fool," answered René, in his drawling Italianate accent, "who thinks himself to be a wise man. Paradox used as a dagger is a gentleman's weapon, as a hammer a mechanic's. This fellow is a farrier of phrases. There is not a spark of true wit in his gizzard."

"Do you know whence he comes or how he is named?" François asked.

"I forget," René answered, and yawned. "Guy knows, I believe. Tell him, Guy."

"I know very little about the fellow," Guy chuckled, "and I care less. He is a Frenchman, hailing last from Germany, and he calls himself Brother Sententius. He professes to teach the philosophy of life."

"Life," said Montigny thoughtfully, as he set down his mug, "is, as the Latin adage informs us, short, whereas art is long. But the only art that interests me is neither longer

nor shorter than the only life that interests me—namely, my own."

Guy Tabarie rubbed his hands and chuckled approval. Villon gaped.

"What may this art be that you speak of with such sympathy?" he questioned. He was prepared, being argumentative, to assert his own preference for the art of poetry.

"The art of life," Montigny answered quietly. He appeared to think that he had said enough and was silent, but Villon, being puzzled, persisted.

"What do you mean by the art of life?" he questioned.

Montigny looked at him languidly through half-closed eyelids.

"When I say the Art of Life," he answered slowly, "I mean the Art of Life. If you like it better, I will say the Art of Living your Life."

François did not feel that he was very much the wiser.

"Is there such an art?" he inquired. Tabarie grinned at his simplicity. Montigny widened his eyelids a little.

"Is there such an art?" he echoed with disdain. "Is there an art of making the best and the most of every day, hour, minute? Believe me, there is such an art, and I am its by no means unworthy professor."

"But how is such an art to be practised?" asked François. The strong wine and the odd talk were getting into his head, fuddling and muddling him. "Everyone wants to enjoy himself and I as much as anyone."

Montigny turned a drolling smile upon Tabarie.

"Shall we tell him, my Guy? Shall we give him the quintessence of wisdom, or leave his innocence to stumble and blunder along the blameless way?"

Villon, resenting the hinted innocence, hotly asserted himself a dare-devil.

"What is this philosophy of yours?" he demanded, a little thickly. "Out with it. Tell us all about it. If I find it good, I shall say so, and if I find it bad I shall say so. I am a man who speaks his mind, I promise you."

Montigny smiled enigmatically.

"I shall be glad of your approbation. I shall grieve at

your disfavour," he said, with such apparent sincerity that Villon took him at his word and swelled with importance. Guy Tabarie chuckled and Villon wondered dimly why.

"I have taken a prodigious fancy to you, my young friend," René asserted, "and I find that I can deny you nothing. You must know, therefore, that I am, as it were, the reincarnation of the greatest of ancient philosophers. Hast ever heard of Epicurus, youth?"

The name was wholly unfamiliar to Villon, but he nodded his head as vigorously as if he had the seventh book of Diogenes Laertius by heart.

"Heard of him!" he retorted, "I should think I have heard of him! I know all about him, I promise you."

He could have wished that his tongue did not seem so unexpectedly too large for his mouth. Montigny's fine forehead was faintly wrinkled by a frown.

"If you know all about him," he observed coldly, "I think there is no reason for me to waste my breath in continuing my discourse."

Instantly Villon became vinously apologetic, and Montigny condescended to explain.

"You must know," he said, "to begin with, that this same Epicurus thought, as I think, that we live but this one life, and have never lived before, as some pretend, and shall never live again, as the many still assert."

François made round eyes at this, suddenly half sobered, and hurriedly crossed himself. Montigny laughed.

"Nay," he said, "this wise Grecian maintained that cessation of existence was a very blessing, hard to esteem too greatly. But however that may be, he advised all and sundry to make the most and the best of this life here present, by the eating of good victual, the drinking of rich wine, the wearing of fine apparel, and, above all, the most liberal commerce with delectable ladies, whether maid or matron, chaste or wanton, single or spoused. The more the merrier was, as who should say, the pith of his philosophy."

Villon was too ignorant of Hellenic wisdom to know what a hash René was making of the doctrines of Epicurus. But his ears were as open as his eyes, and because he was

distinctly tipsy he found himself much impressed with the utterances of his exhorter.

"So he lived in a garden," continued René, drinking hard the while he talked, "with a fellowship of pretty ladies of easy virtue and a company of jolly topers, and passed the time from morn to eve in kissing and carousing. By the Gods, he was a rare and a tearing blade, that same Epicurus. I give you his health for a toast."

René, as he spoke, rose lightly to his nimble feet with extended cup. Guy Tabarie, laughing and lumbering, followed his example. Poor François lurched from his seat, swayed against the table, slopped the most of his wine over its surface and hiccoughed "Epicurus." Then he abruptly sat down and Tabarie good-naturedly filled his glass again.

François could not afterwards recall the course of the conversation that followed on his whimsical introduction to the Epicurean philosophy, but he did remember some semi-lucid intervals in which he found himself expounding, with astonishing eloquence, the secret of his soul, namely, his pure, passionate and undying love for a certain nameless, adorable lady. René listened to his confession with a sympathy which brought tears to François' eyes. He reached across the table and wrung Montigny's dirty hand. He protested that at last he had found a friend.

"You have found a friend, indeed," Montigny assured him. "And I will give you the proof of my friendship in this very instant of time. This love that you profess for the lady——"

"Not profess," murmured Villon thickly. René ignored the interruption and continued:

"Is no better than a sweet venom working in your veins, only to be driven thence, believe me, by a counterpoison. Good Lord, lad, one woman is as apt as another and you shall learn the truth of my saying at this very present. Let me see; who shall be your Semiramis?"

He tapped the fingers of his left hand and muttered to himself, as one that enumerates a list of familiar beauties. Villon's head nodded to his breast. Tabarie grinned.

"Macé," said René emphatically, "little Macé of Orleans.

Who could be better, my Guy, for the task of illuminating the darkness of our dear young friend's mind as to the true meaning of the tender passion than little Macé?"

Guy Tabarie chuckled. There was a pungency in René's fun which always appealed to him. He jerked a derisive thumb at François, drooping drowsily over the board.

By this time the head of Villon was huddled on his bosom; his lids were sealed, and he was snoring fitfully. Montigny winked at Tabarie and smiled. Then with dexterous, dirty fingers he proceeded to rifle his victim, picking his pocket of its little store of coins and relieving him of the pendant about his neck that had been the gift of Ambroise, appraised the loot with a slightly contemptuous approval, and slid the lot carelessly into his pocket. Then bidding Tabarie arouse the sleeper he rose to depart. He paid the reckoning out of the cash of François, whistling the tune of a Tuscan ballad while Guy clapped François heavily upon the shoulder.

François woke with a start to find that he was feeling stiff and feeling cold and very uncertain as to where he was. He stared owlishly at René, who stood over against him on the other side of the table, which said table he was beating with his fist in the intention of aiding Guy to arouse Villon from his slumbers. Villon was unable to realize where he was or what had befallen him. In a bemused condition he listened to Tabarie's forcibly-expressed opinion that he had slept long enough, and that unless he was ready to put himself to further charges in the way of liquor, it was high time that he should take his departure. François, feeling in no mood for further libations, lurched uneasily to his feet, and with some assistance from his companions stumbled into the clammy coolness of the night air.

Thereafter the memory of François became confused, and all later attempts to pierce its clouds and compose its sequence proved futile. Dimly he remembered reeling through the murky streets, one arm linked with René, one arm linked with Tabarie, while all three howled, like so many tom-cats, the refrain of some unclean ballad, the

precise words of which proved elusive to Villon's sluggish tongue, though their meaning admitted no equivocation even to his fuddled brain. So reeling, so screeching, the trio, fomenting horror in decent citizens and dodging occasional alarms of the Watch, with a dexterity which was wholly due to René and Guy, and in which François, staggering and gasping, had no share, made their way to a purlieu and came to a halt before a sinister-looking house. François, who by this time had suffered his voice to trail away into silence, was as one that walks sleeping, but the jerk of the halt aroused him from his torpor. He was bemusedly aware that the door of the house opened in response to a rapped signal from René, that a girl stood in the passage holding a candle, and that for some reason the three followed the girl up the creaking stairs into a garret. Here René, with an elaborate affectation of ceremonial, presented François, whom Tabarie was propping with efforts to the laughing Macé.

This Macé that René patronized, this Macé to whom he now presented François, was one of those daughters that Paris has always mothered; neither handsome nor ugly; having an effect of prettiness that analysis denied, and yet that sometimes and to certain temperaments could afford to defy analysis. The minx had no good features in her face, but the whole, however ill-composed, was piquant and provocative; her towsly hair was of a lively chestnut; her eyes were bright with insolence and derision, her lips were large and scarlet ramparts for teeth that were somewhat irregular and over-large, but as strong as a dog's and as white as a wolf's. Her cheeks were flooded with a lively colour; her skin had the warm hue of a seeming sunburn; her figure was full and her carriage impudent. Above all, and this was what made the best of a bundle of incongruities, she had the audacious grace of youth. Still young, she looked younger than she was; she was the hoyden, the tomboy that appeals with power to some. To François, if he had been sober, she would not have appealed at all; but as he was some three parts stupefied with liquor, his first impression of Macé

was of a dazzling enchantress who at once allured and welcomed.

François woke up from a drunken sleep to find himself physically sick and mentally in an agony of abasement. The fierceness of his hysteria painted a macabre picture of one fallen from Heaven, banished from Paradise, for the pollution of his body; nay, more, one that was stamped on the forehead with the stigma of Cain for the murder of his soul. Images of degradation besieged his brain; he was the Pariah of poets, the scapegoat; he was a new Judas that had betrayed his Muse; he was the traitor that had sold the pass, the renegade that had defiled his creed, the idiot that had squandered in an orgy all the sweet scents and sounds and colours of the world. With nausea ravaging his inwards, with his hands huddled against his temples, with the beak of the vulture in his liver and the axe of pain splitting his skull, François did his best to gather the rags of his manhood about him and face the damnation. He surveyed with loathing the sordid room, squalid in its gaudiness; he sniffed the reek of wine; he scowled at the crazy couch on which a girl squatted, grinning like an imp, the witch of his nightmare. The creature was not without charm; her face had the insolence of a faun; her hair had the hue of flames in sunlight; her eyes challenged, mocked and tempted, if they had never denied; her lips were certainly ripe to give and take kisses. François hated her.

He staggered heavily to his feet and eyed the girl with a dreary repugnance.

"My God!" he said, and then could say no more, though he burned to shriek sermons, volumes, libraries of rage and despair. He glared at the girl and cursed his own dullness and lumpishness; the girl, hugging her knees, laughed.

"What is the matter with you, little man?" she asked, and though her voice was pleasant enough, it ravaged the youth's hearing as with harrow's teeth. "Have you never drunk the glass too much before, or slept under a strange roof?"

Villon shook his head. His tongue could not speak; his ears drummed; he lurched towards the door.

"What a mannikin it is!" cried Macé. "Sit by my side a while and come to yourself at leisure. The world is young for us."

To François as she spoke the world seemed in its dotage, and she an unspelled, detested sorceress. Even then the bent of his intellect made him think of Circe and the men she made swine, but he meant what he thought. The girl stirred a little, unclasped her hands and stretched them towards François. Then she recoiled as he swung his clenched fists above his head, and she shrank in sudden fear that he meant to strike her. But no blow fell. Only François spoke at last. "Damn you!" he screamed, "damn you!" and so staggered from the room and down the cranky stairs.

CHAPTER XX

THE EASY WAY TO HADES

FRANÇOIS seemed to stagger to the Red Gate through streets peopled with fiends and spectres. His wits, indeed, gradually escaping from the benumbing influences of the night's carouse, assured him that these were no other than decent citizens early abroad on their daily business; but his groaning conscience transmuted them all into solemn or mocking accusers and condemners of his profligacy. When he got to his uncle's house he found the door happily open, and he was able to slip upstairs, unseen and unheard, to his own little room which never looked so clean and cool and precious as now. François drenched himself with draughts of water from his pitcher; laved his soiled fingers and his burning face, and threw himself upon his bed in a passion of remorse. What had befallen the white-souled servant of Ambroise, the tunable rhymer, the eager scholar, the future Cardinal or President? That gentle, excellent youth had vanished, drowned in a sea of wine, stained with unerasable baseness; what was left of him lay wallowing on a bed with a splitting forehead and a shrieking stomach. François had never dreamed that he could feel so wretched, physically and mentally; he wished he could cease to be; he wished he had never been. He was not really aware, until later, of the one thing that had a touch of consolation in it in all his misery. This was that the misery, being so great, had completely banished from his mind all fear, even all thought, of Philippe Sermois. Whether as Sermois or whether as Brother Sententius, he failed, for the time being, to play any part in the consciousness of François.

The clean youth of yesterday might have troubled his mind about one that seemed the incarnation of malignancy. But the unclean drunkard who wallowed on the decent linen of a decent room had at least in his downfall gained this much of advantage over his adversary, that he had ceased to dread him. François was as base if not as bad as Philippe. If in the fight of life they were now to be pitted against one another, they were so pitted with the equality that both were now servants of darkness. Indeed, François questioned later, when memory of Philippe returned to his addled mind, if he, François, were not the darker and more dangerous spirit, having fallen from a heaven of light and beauty and love in which Philippe Sermois could never have set his feet. François, in these later thoughts, found a kind of horrid pride in his own degradation. For the moment, through the fumes of drink and dissipation, he could only mourn over the destruction of his ideals and the loss of his innocence.

By and by, as the fumes of drink and dissipation drifted and dispersed, his youth asserted itself; he realized that he was alive and must needs take action in a living world. He cleaned himself outwardly—clean inwardly, he assured himself with a groan, he never should be again—and pulled himself together to face the day's work at the University. He stole downstairs, past the chamber where his worthy uncle was still snoring. He peeped into the housekeeper's room, and finding that she was absent, gone abroad no doubt upon her early marketing, he made shift to stay his stomach with some bread and milk. Cold meat there was and a sturdy cheese and other excellent viands, but just then poor François felt, with the pious man of the Scriptures, that his soul abhorred all manner of meat, and he ate his meagre fare with reluctance, listening anxiously the while lest he should hear the step of the returning dame. No such sound disturbed his hurried meal, and he was able to steal out of the house unseen and to make his way, still somewhat staggeringly, towards the University, wondering the while that the heavens did not open and rain destruction upon him for his

apostasy. It seemed to him, in his simplicity, that he had committed the unforgivable sin, and that he ought, if he did not, to carry on his forehead the brand of Cain.

Apart from these solemn considerations he was, more ignobly, extremely chagrined to find himself depleted in pocket of his silver pieces, and, which was still more tragic, to find that the gift of Ambroise was missing from his neck. He knew enough of civic law to know that he could make complaint to authority and have the squalid lodging of Macé searched. But also he knew enough of human nature to be very sure that any such search would be made in vain. If Macé had got the chain, then Macé had disposed of it surely by this time and would successfully disclaim all knowledge of it and of him. There was nothing for it but to swallow his losses, with his sorrows, as well as he could. Young as he was and foolish as he was, he was yet enough of a philosopher to be aware that the adding of tears to spilt milk only results in the most ridiculous and pitiable mixture in the world. But the thought of his chain and his money mingled persistently with his own fierce sense of physical and mental degradation, and it was only in after years that he was able to regard this strange mingling of emotions with anything like the sense of humour which it assuredly deserved.

It was with a troubled mind that François, approaching his own particular class-room, saw, in the narrow street ahead of him, René de Montigny and Guy Tabarie leaning against a bulkhead in an attitude of careless expectation. His heart fluttered in his bosom, ravaged by anger and by fear. What would he not have given to carry himself valiantly before the pair that had so shamefully misled him; to call them roundly to account, to demand and receive satisfaction? But he knew very well that the brace of blackguards would deride and defy him; that he would prove no better than a baby for them to play with; that prudence compelled him to be craven, to veil his rage.

While he was feverishly asking how he should best carry himself, René de Montigny, who had caught sight of him

the moment he had appeared upon the cobbles of the street, shook himself free from his prop with an easy grace of movement that Guy Tabarie, imitating his action, sought in vain to copy. He advanced, somewhat to François' astonishment, to greet him with smiling face and extended hand.

"What a marvellous, mad rascal you are!" he cried before François could stammer a syllable. "You drink me and Guy here silly; you spend the night in Paradise, and you turn up here to your duties as fresh as a daisy, while Guy and I are as yellow as saffron."

Now François knew perfectly well that René was not speaking the truth, for his mirror that morning had limned a haggard face with pale lips and staring eyes, while both René and Guy looked as cheerful, if as unwashen, as before. But it is the vice of youth to feel flattered at being attributed with the calendar of rascalities, and poor François began unconsciously to perk a little and feel a faint but measurable dwindling of downheartedness.

"You should be thankful," René continued, "that you have good friends to watch over you while you are on the go. Here is something that pretty minx Macé would have certainly pocketed if I had not forestalled her."

As René spoke he dived into the bosom of his dirty doublet and drew thence something which he extended in a shut fist to François. Suddenly opening all his long, fine, grimy fingers he displayed on the palm of his hand the pendant of Ambroise. François could not restrain an infantile cry of delight.

"My dear jewel!" he cried, and snatched it eagerly while René liberated a benevolent smile. "I thought I had lost it for ever."

"Why, so you would," René assured him, "if it had not been for my foresight and prevision. You are such a devil of a fellow, if I may be permitted to say so, my dear lad, when you take the bit between your teeth that, by the beard of Jove, there is no stopping you. I flattered myself that I knew something of life, but really——"

Villon, clinging to his rescued treasure, drank in the

flattery of René with a rapture. Was he really such a splendid, reckless fellow? After all, a man must be a man, and his agitations and agonies of so short a while ago began to dwindle in value amazingly. He grinned feebly in response to the smiles that mantled the faces of René and Guy, whom, but a short few minutes before, he had told himself to regard as the greatest knaves on the face of the earth. He tried to stammer some words that would seem appropriate to this new character of dare-devil with which Montigny had fitted him, but none would come to his lips. Montigny saw his difficulty and was quick with alleviation. He made a gesture to Guy, who promptly produced from under cover of his student's gown a comfortably fat flagon which he delivered into the hands of Réne. René balanced it lovingly in his palms and then extended it to François.

"Here," he said gaily, "is the *elixir vitæ*, the liquid alchemy that converts all the greyness of life into clearest gold. Drink, happy youth, and consecrate yourself one of our brotherhood."

François was so overmastered by the winning manner and the affable parlance of Montigny, that he could do no other than obey. He reached out a shaking hand for the flagon and then and there, in the open street, in the very face of a temple of wisdom, he clapped the vessel to his lips and swigged a long drink. His throat was dry with his night's potations, his brain as dry as tinder. That draught from Montigny's flagon seemed to soothe his thirst, to moisten his mind and to set him on his legs again.

"'Thereout suck I no small advantage,'" René quoted, with a mocking mimicry of reverence as he watched the pallid face of François expand and redden under the influence of the strong wine. "Believe me, dear youth, there is nothing so restorative, of a fuddled morning, as a hair of the dog that bit you overnight."

François, captivated and reanimated by the nonchalant philosophy of Montigny, took him at his word, and consumed enough hairs to make a comfortable coat for the woolliest dog that ever waddled. And the beginning and

the end were the first day. But the kindred days that followed were far more than seventy times seven.

It is dreary, to any save the cynic, to watch the declension of bright youth. The business began so bravely with morning-tinted cheeks and morning-coloured mind; heart and brain attuned to fine desires; the white soul a parchment for the engrossing of splendid passions, exquisite devotions, incomparable ideals. So are we young Galahad in silver harness, with a hand pledged to honour and a gaze fixed on the single star. And then, all of a sudden, a jest on the lips of a zany, a leer in the eyes of a drab, a splash of liquor tilted into a wicked glass, and the face of the world is changed for a foolish young gentleman. The would-be hero, saint and martyr of yesterday is translated into the rake, the toper, the glutton of to-day. All the grosser appetites loom larger like those atmospheric spectres seen in haunted forests; the puddled mind dwells more fondly on mean satisfactions; the muddled blood craves for sharper stimulus to send it coursing through its customed channels. To epitomize, you have certainly spoiled a decent citizen; you have possibly spoiled a great man.

To do our rascal François justice, if he swallowed the bitter-sweet cup with avidity, if he trailed his raiment in the kennel, if he learned with a light heart and a loose lip to deny his immortals, it was, in the beginning at least, because he considered himself in the condition of one that has lost his soul. There is an offence against the faith of Christian folk which is called the committal of the unforgivable sin. Men of gifts and parts, and men giftless and partless, have permitted themselves to believe that they have committed this unpardonable offence, and have gone crazy with the thought and trailed maimed lives to a miserable grave. François was in little less than such a tragic case. He had taken his sentimental ideality about Ambroise with the pomposity which is only possible in a young lad with his calf-love and an old man that falls in love with the housemaid, and is only forgivable in the former case. He thought, being metamorphosed by his madness into the like-

ness of a jackass as much as ever was the man in the Greek fable, that he was really to go his way through the world with his whole soul and body dedicated to the service of a woman who was the wife of another man, and who would have split her soft sides with laughter, and then drowned her sweet eyes in tears if she could have been made acquainted with the state of the lad's mind.

But given a loony youth, so moonstruck, let him be impregnated with the quintessence of sentiment, and then let chance, or craft, tempt him into the garden of wine and wantonness, and it is very likely that the result will be a more unprofitable profligate than some fellow of sturdier temper and duller wit whose face nature has marked with the word knave from the word go. François, his body drenched with liquor and his mind drenched with hateful memory of Macé, began to feel a kind of defiant delight at what he first believed to be his degradation, but which he soon came to consider as his delivery. A gracious imagery of faith pictures man as walking between two companion spirits; one of good and one of evil impulse, but in those hot and heavy days after the marriage of Ambroise, François walked with two companions that plied him with the same counsel with differing wit. Guy Tabarie was frankly the body-servant, the belly-god; the only wise business of life was to be warm and well fed and well plenished with liquor, and to have as many facile amours as a man could wish. But René wooed with a cunninger voice; he talked with an art that could, as the saying goes, charm a bird from the tree; he was steeped in vile rhymes and putrescent philosophy; he was brisk in infidel villanies, and there was a sultry season when François came to look upon him as a kind of demi-god.

CHAPTER XXI

BROTHER SENTENTIUS

MASTER FRANÇOIS, leaning over a lonely bridge and looking thoughtfully into the river, found his meditations interrupted by the imposition of a hand upon his shoulder. He did not mind the interruption of his meditations overmuch, for they were none of the cheerfullest and consisted mainly of speculations as to how he was to raise the money needful for his new standards of pleasure. What he did mind was the discovery of the ownership of the hand when, after turning on his elbow to face his accoster, he found himself face to face with Philippe Sermois.

Sermois was not, for the occasion, clad in a scholar's robe, but was habited rather after the manner of a well-to-do burgess that might be some great man's steward or secretary. His garb was at once rich without ostentation and sober without austerity, and he had a gold chain about his neck from which depended a gold ornament in the shape of a hand, with the second and third fingers folded against the palm and restrained there by the thumb, while the index finger and the little finger were pointed in rigid parallel. His vast face was as impassive as of old, but with a certain ruddiness colouring its grey.

The world had changed somewhat for François in the handful of sand that had shifted in the glass since he last looked Sermois in the face. The time was indeed short, but it had been long enough to bring him acquainted with many kinds of rascals and to take an infinite variety of ruffianism as a matter of course. Therefore he felt that he ought not to experience the old horror on encounter-

ing the baleful gaze of Sermois, and it galled him to find that his first disposition was to wince, if not to cringe, before it. The faintest shadow of a smile rippled for an instant over the flat of the face of Sermois.

"It is well," he said in his level voice, that carried a sneer with it as a spear-head may carry a smear of poison, "that I have found you, my student of old sages, my lover of young ladies, for there is a saying of my mouth to fit the hearing of your ear. I do not like you, and if you are wise you will keep out of my way."

If François still went chill at the sight of this fellow he had now a character for rascality to keep up, even to himself, and he aired effrontery by shaking the paw of Sermois away from his shoulder.

"I cannot imagine why you should dislike me," he protested impudently; "but as I have no great liking for you, why, we can cry quits."

"I will tell you why I dislike you," said Sermois stolidly. "Indeed I have, as I think, told you already; but it is always a pleasure to repeat such information. When I first saw you I was poor, dependent, despised; little better than nameless, little better than penniless; thirsty and hungry for the wine and flesh of life. You came frisking by, pampered, well fed, with a knight's coat on your body and an ape's grin on your face, and you were suffered to run errands to pretty ladies. You were the lap-dog of the ancient fable, where I should have been the jackass. I hated you for that. I hated you later for the grip of your master-bully's finger and thumb at the back of my neck. I shall hate you because you have crossed my path and because it is written that you will cross my path again. But it is also written that I will kill you one of these days, and you will only be remembered, if you are remembered at all, because I killed you."

François' sense of the ludicrous would have tempted him to sheer laughter if any one else had spoken such crazy words. But they seemed more fatal than crazy, falling as they did from that face which showed at once placid and implacable in its apparent vacuity. For a moment

François was tempted to retort with a betrayal of his private knowledge of the dealings of Sermois with Messire de Beauvau. But after an instant's reflection François decided swiftly that he would tell Philippe Sermois nothing. Since the fellow was his declared enemy, it was no part of the business of François to warn him of the danger in which he lay if he ever crossed the path of Messire de Beauvau again. Neither did François deem it advisable to fan the enmity of Philippe by telling him how he, François, had spied upon the secret trickery of the house by the gallows' square in Saumur. Let sleeping dogs lie seemed a very wise proverb to his mind just then. Furthermore, he overruled a momentary temptation to denounce Philippe Sermois to Messire d'Estouteville for his part in that Saumur business. It would probably mean the hanging of Sermois, and so the ridding the world of a rogue; but also it would mean a great deal of unnecessary perturbation and pain to the good knight and his lady, involving, as it must, explanations now unnecessary and likely to cause discomfort. For all these reasons François resolved to hold his peace and hold his hand.

"If it is written," he replied with as much composure as he could muster, for the talk was uncomfortable talk, and the place sufficiently lonely to make homicide feasible, "it is written, but are you so very surely the reader of the writing, Brother Sententius?"

Sermois almost grinned at the carriage of François.

"Paris," he said, "is a dunghill that rears shrill cockerels. I think you crow louder here than you crowed a year ago in Anjou. But he crows loudest who crows last, my Lutetian juvenal, and the time is not yet for me to bring you to a reckoning. I have seen much of the world since we parted, learned much of the world since we parted. I shall see more and know more ere we meet again. But I think, in the meantime, it will please you to know that it is a great purpose of mine, though not indeed my chief purpose, to gratify my desire for the lady Ambroise. There is an Eve's apple that was denied to your milk-teeth, but I shall relish it when the time comes for biting. You

flame, fool, you flame; but if you lift a hand I will fling you into the river, and you will die before your time, which would be a pity, for I choose rather to follow the appointed way."

François, indeed, had made a movement as if to fling himself upon Sermois, but had refrained, realizing the futility of such an action. Sermois waited for a few seconds, watching him blankly; then, paying him a derisive salutation, he turned on his heel and went his way.

François watched Philippe Sermois disappear with an oddly mingled emotion, half elation and half despair. The fellow had a quality of inspiring the passion of fear beyond anyone that François had ever encountered, and this power, together with the sinister predictions which Philippe was so glib in, made him feel qualmish and queasy and abject. But on the other hand, with the removal of his ominous presence, François began to pluck up his spirits and rally his resolution. He realized to the limit of realization how ill-qualified he was to carry on a contest with such an opponent as Philippe Sermois, so physically strong, so mentally unscrupulous and merciless. But there dwelt a kind of native valour in Villon's small body and large heart which summoned him to be most determined where most he seemed menaced. Mentally, he apostrophized his vanished adversary.

"It may very well be that it is written that you and I shall meet again. Very well, then; though I would rather have your room than your company, if I cannot escape my fate, I am at least free to meet it in my own way. A man cannot forbid the thunder, but at least he need not stand under a tree. A man cannot prevent the snow from falling, but at least he can wear a double coat."

By these cryptic and allegorical reflections François was merely representing to himself the necessity of strengthening his chances in the strife of life by all the means in his power. He could not widen his chest or heighten his head, but he could at least so train his wits and school his limbs as to make the very utmost of his heritage of manhood. Up to this present he had seen others efficient in arms, but

it had scarcely occurred to him that such efficiency might be advantageous, if not imperative, for him. His way of life had seemed to be mapped out for him, sedentary, scholarly, secluded, easy-going civilian, whether he devoted himself to theology or law. What to him were weapons and their use, or the arts and addresses of men that took the field? But now, in a twinkling, all seemed changed in his existence. In a brief revolution of time he had lost his innocence, pawned his simplicity, denied his ideal; he had wallowed in drunkenness and wantonness, and now he had been brought face to face with the threat of grave peril. Life was proving a very different thing from what he had imagined it to be, and he himself a very different fellow. Well, if the conditions were changed, at least it was clearly his business, if he were not to prove an unutterable blockhead, to fit himself for those conditions.

There was a gate-keeper at the house of Messire Robert d'Estouteville who was an old soldier, and had served long years in the English wars. He and François had made friends, and François had often sat with him in his gate-house and listened while the veteran told him tales of Joan the Maid, by whose side the man had fought, and of Dunois, and Lahire, and all the rest of those splendid gentlemen who had been stimulated by the words and the example of the girl from Domrémy. To this man François went hotfoot, that very hour.

"Gilbert," he said, when greetings were given and taken, "would it be possible for such an one as I to learn something of swordcraft and the manage of arms?"

Old Gilbert looked thoughtfully at François with his honest eyes and tugged at his beard with a sinewy hand.

"You are not the lad I should pick from a bunch to make a soldier of," he said thoughtfully. "What is this bee in your bonnet? I thought you were in training for the priesthood, or the law, or some such sleepy business."

"So I was, and so I am, maybe," François answered; "but it has come into my mind that I might be wise to learn something of handcraft as well as bookcraft against an evil chance."

"Therein," said Gilbert approvingly, "you have acted well. I know nothing of books save this, that a man cannot win battles with them, and it seems to me that life is a battling business, wherein every man has to defend his own head as best he may. So, if you are indeed in earnest, I will teach you how to defend your head, my lad."

François assured the old soldier that he was in earnest, as indeed he was; and he proved his earnestness thereafter for many and many a day. He stole hours from the new pleasures he delighted in to seek out Gilbert and learn from him the noble art of how a sword should be handled. Because the old soldier loved the lad he taught him of his best, which was very good; and because Villon was nimble of wit and of limb he learned with a will until his learning was translated in a very considerable measure of skill. But all this took time, and François kept his study of swordplay to himself, and none of the raffish braggart, canting crew with which he was associated knew of the steel thread in the web of his life. This shining secret was kept ever from René de Montigny, for as François said to himself, aphoristically, it may be well to be prepared, but it may not be well to proclaim preparation.

As for Brother Sententius, who to François was Philippe Sermois, he disappeared from the University as mysteriously as he had appeared therein, leaving behind him a bubble of reputation as a teacher and preacher which soon burst and dispersed. René de Montigny had it that he was gone into Italy in the train of a young nobleman that was voyaging to Rome. It was likely enough; it mattered very little to anyone except to François, who felt a distinct sense of relief at the thought that he was out of the way.

CHAPTER XXII

THE DEVIL'S WHISTLE

IF François thus early in his University career abandoned any serious attempt to earn distinction in the Humanities, he very soon won for himself a kind of leadership among the riff-raff of the place. Under the insinuating influence of René de Montigny he not merely consented to turn one cold shoulder on the law and one cold shoulder on divinity, but he assured himself and succeeded in convincing himself that it was a much better thing for a fellow of his intelligence to be followed and looked up to by a gang of rascallions than to be making his way painfully up the narrow stairway to success. As for René de Montigny, he watched his new disciple's conduct with an amused smile. He had been at the pains to gain him over in the beginning, because it diverted him to gain anyone over from the straight rules of steadiness and good conduct. Afterwards, as he noted the aptness with which François fitted himself to his new career as rake-helly devil-may-care, his interest in his young pupil began to deepen. There were schemes slowly forming in René's mind which, when they came to maturity, might very well be forwarded by such a confederate as François promised to prove. But of all this François knew nothing. The course of Villon's declension followed the familiar lines. First came a half-regretful neglect of the studies which up to now he had held dear; then the neglect deepened into an indifference that was close allied to contempt. François repeated to himself the assurances of René de Montigny that there were better ways of life for a dashing and gallant lad than the study of psalm-books

or law books; that it was wiser to spill red wine than black ink; that the smiles of light women were livelier allurements than the lessons of pedagogues. François voiced all the familiar catchwords and phrases of profligacy like a litany. Youth has but one time. Let us live and love while we may. Wine and women make the joy of life. With these ancient scraps of squalid philosophy did François fortify his heart and stupefy his conscience, while he employed all his ability in the grateful task of making himself as like unto René de Montigny as possible. And because he was nimble of wit he soon proved himself a very pretty ape of his Italianate model. He would never have consented to play the shadow to Tabarie, though the gross, fat fellow diverted him well enough and made merry company. It was the elegance, the air of detachment, the parade of a cultured cynicism in Montigny that attracted him.

For a while, indeed, François contrived to allot a certain portion of his ill-spent hours to those purposes for which the University of Paris was seriously intended. He had a lively curiosity, and, in consequence, a liking for a general knowledge of things that interested him, and as he was pretty quick in getting at the core of any subject he condescended to study, he could pass muster for little less than a prodigy of erudition among the rabble of careless drunkards and dicers whose company he now for the most part kept. But more and more, as time went on, he found it pleasant to lounge at ease in the snug dusk of a tavern with a covey of cronies about him, all drinking, gambling, roystering, with much singing of lewd songs and much telling of tales that had better have been left untold. In this choice society François was beginning to shine as a recognized star that was only surpassed in luminosity by the older and more established talents of René de Montigny. Here, François would assure himself, on such convivial occasions, looking around him and apostrophizing the smoky walls and the bleary faces—here, when all is said and done, is the true Academy; here is the real School of Life which teaches of things as they are;

here are the most amusing masters and pupils of the most amusing arts in the world.

He was wary enough at the first to keep his vagaries a secret from his uncle. The commendable Canon of St. Benôit fondly believed that his nephew was a pattern to youth, studious, painstaking, pious, sober and continent, and he would listen with the greatest attention and interest to the wholly imaginary stories which François would relate of his routine, of the lectures he attended and the courses of study which he pursued. Even when the effects of dissipation began to assert themselves in the pale face, dull eyes, and muddied colour of the young man, Canon Guillaume only felt concern to think that his nephew was suffering from the effects of overwork. Then he would urge the scapegrace to temper zeal with discretion. He would observe profoundly that all work and no play make Jack a dull boy, and would urge the value of an occasional holiday for a country walk with him in the environs of Paris. And François, who had no inclination for such insipid diversion, would listen with a demure face and an internal giggle, and when the Canon had concluded would protest that he had no feeling of fatigue, and that he was at his happiest when he was in the thick of his beloved studies. Then the graceless rogue would go off to join his boon companions at the "Fircone" or elsewhere, and the Canon would look after him and congratulate himself on being blessed in so exemplary a nephew.

In this time of the declining of François, he did not decline so decisively as to lose all alliance with that portion of the world which abided by the standard of respectability. He still paid his respects, from time to time, at the house of Messire Robert d'Estouteville, and still was conscious of a sharp constriction of the heart when he was permitted to salute the hand and admire the eyes of the lady Ambroise. Ambroise was by now not merely a wife but a mother; yet she carried her matronhood with so airy and dainty a grace as to lend, according to François, a kind of fairylike quality to the usual com-

monplace accompaniments of matrimony. Still, she seemed to him like the sylph of Saumur; still she seemed to incarnate the exquisite spirit of youth and beauty and joy. He always came from those glimpses of her with an emotion that was very like regret, and an emotion that was very like a desire to mend his ways. But when he got back again into the swaggering fellowship that held him as their main master of mirth, his regrets and his desires alike withered, and he was once again the jolly dog that was ever ready to plan some jape at the expense of civil decorum or some raid upon the resources of some unsuspecting taverner.

François had a mind that was prompt for invention of lively tricks and whimsical devices of a kind to tickle the studentish palate. Thus, though he was by no means big of bulk, and by no means huge of height, and by no means a strong man of his hands, but rather a weedy, meagre fellow, with a thin, eager face and a thin, nimble body, he came, by virtue of his ingenious wit, to be accepted as a kind of captain among the lads of the University. Master François would have liked exceedingly to have been burly and strong, and to have blustered and swashbucklered his dominating way into the esteem of stout men and the good graces of fair women. But from an early age he had recognized that such was not to be his course. His it was to guide by craft and to prevail with cunning, if he were to guide and prevail at all, and as it was his nearest and dearest ambition to be to the very frontiers of his possibilities a ruler of men—and of women—he resolved to be crafty, he resolved to be cunning. After all, he reflected, consoling himself as a bookish clerk should, with bookish thoughts, it was not always brute strength that prevailed, even among the heroes that fought before Troy. Did not his dear Ovid assure him that if Ajax, the son of Telamon, was as mighty as a giant, he was overcome in the end and reduced to self-slaughtering madness by the astute and sagacious Ulysses, who was never for seizing with hard knocks what he might snare with soft words. Therefore our François, considering his somewhat insig-

nificant proportions, leanness of limb and gauntness of girth, decided that in the epic poem of his epoch he must be content to play the part of the wily Ithacan, and leave Hector and Achilles to the better thewed. He was not greatly depressed by this inevitable decision, having from the earliest a habit of considering that he was sealed for distinction; also, that the pen was mightier than the sword, that mind was more than matter, with other the like comforting axioms and adages which tend to warm the large heart housed in the small body.

For illustration of his life at this season take, out of a thousand of his escapades and enterprises of that time, the adventure that is perhaps the most famous, the adventure of the Devil's Whistle. He immortalized it in song, or hoped he had done so, making a burlesque epic on the business which he caused Guy Tabarie, who wrote a clerkly hand, to copy out fair for him, on fine white paper. Its buffoonery wooed the sides of studentdom to split; the bells of Paris rang and the walls of Paris rocked with laughter; even the grave and the law-abiding were, once you persuaded them to read, compelled perforce to smile. Alas, for the lost epic of the Devil's Whistle! We must needs take its merriment on trust. It occupies an honourable place in the Library of Dreams, with the comedies of Menander, and the complete text of the Satyricon. But on the bookshelves of reality it may find no place; it has long since vanished from all knowledge; many generations have turned to dust since its quips and sallies tickled Paris. But if we cannot have the bombastic masterpiece—of which no copy has even been found in the archives of the Abbey of Bonne Aventure—we can at least record the episode which gave birth to it. The brawling jest of the Devil's Whistle came about in this wise.

There lived in Paris at this time a certain wealthy elderly female against whom François cherished an antipathy. For the most part he carried a cheerful indifference to elderly females; it being part and parcel of his new creed that the first business of a woman was to be young and the second business was to be pretty. There was

only one elderly woman in all the world in whom he took any interest—and that, alas! was something of a spasmodic and unreliable interest at this time—and apart from his mother, one elderly woman was very much the same as another elderly woman to him. But this particular elderly woman had managed to impinge upon his conscience more violently than most of her kind. For she had set herself to meddle—or so François put it—with certain young and pretty friends and acquaintances of his, and François hotly resented the meddling.

It was natural, even inevitable, that among the rowdy and riotous folk with whom François was now so intimately linked, there should be found a number of women, who, whatever their defects and demerits, had for the most part the merits of good looks, jollity and youth. If in the familiar phrase these damsels were no better than they should be, at least, to the taste of François, they were no worse, and he found, or persuaded himself that he found, a great deal of pleasure in their society. They stood to him for so many flowers in that garden—so different from his old, cherished Garden of the Rose—wherein he had elected to find delight. Marion the Idol, Guillemette, big Jehanne of Brittany, little Jeanneton de Meaux, Thomassine Marot, Perrette the Fair, Isabeau, these and many another tickled his fancy, inspired wild rhymes and shared his money when he had any to share.

It seemed good to this Dame of Bruyères, who lived in the great house that was guarded by the Devil's Whistle, to foster, maintain and cherish a crusade against the whole fellowship of these daughters of joy. She took it upon herself to peregrinate those portions of Paris where such girls did congregate, and there to deliver herself to homilies, sermons and adjurations, calling upon these gallant lasses to change their ways and forswear their playfellows.

Now as François was at that time the boon companion and sworn champion of all those pretty imps and pert minions, he chose to be mightily affronted by, and resentful of, the homilies of the labouring dame. If they had

been good homilies, it is possible that François would not have minded so much, for though he had a dislike to preachments, which was natural enough considering the kind of life he now led, he had such a sense of the fair and fit as enabled him to discriminate between a good sermon and a bad sermon. But the sermons of the Dame de Bruyères were deplorably bad sermons, lacking in the slightest pulse of power to rouse a tremor of remorse in any human bosom. So François, harassed in his feelings as a comrade of jovial doxies, and as an artist that understood the meaning and usage of words, cherished a sturdy grudge against the exemplary but annoying woman. And the François who had fallen from grace was always ready, if opportunity afforded, to play some punitive trick upon the person who had offended his susceptibilities. He set himself, therefore, the holiday task of finding out some way of paying the good lady for her unwelcome harangues, and after some cogitation, he hit upon a plan which commended itself very briskly to his old sense of humour and his new taste for practical joking.

There stood before the doorway of this worthy woman's dwelling a certain huge and ancient stone that had been, as it were, for ages a kind of landmark in the neighbourhood. It had once probably formed part of some religious building in the days when Druids sacrificed by the banks of the Seine, or even earlier, when a man that was more than half a savage and scarce less than a quarter an ape was dimly recognizing uncouth objects of worship in stocks and stones. This particular stone was a rough and irregular pillar of some six feet in height and two feet in diameter, that at one time in the infinite past may have been pointed at the summit, but that was now too chipped and jagged to offer basis for serious conjecture if serious conjecture had been forthcoming. But serious conjecture was not forthcoming. The learned doctors of the University were not learned enough to have any opinion, theory, or guess as to the nature or origin of a prehistoric monument. They knew no more and cared no more about all that than did the rough and tumble citizens

who passed it in their daily walks. These same rough and tumble citizens had long ago, for some reason of their own, been pleased to nickname the stone, "The Devil's Whistle," and as the Devil's Whistle accordingly it was known to every resident in Paris, from the king to the beggarman, from the head sage of the University to the head rogue of the Court of Miracles.

The worthy lady with the taste for sermonizing, before whose door the ancient monument stood, was neither incommoded by its neighbourhood nor scandalized by its sobriquet. On the contrary, she regarded its presence at her gate with a considerable degree of pride, and felt something of the same kind of satisfaction at its site and popularity that a beadle may feel in the ancient cathedral on which he waits. The Devil's Whistle was as much one of the city's monuments as the church of Notre Dame, and to be practically its proprietor conferred distinction.

François had more than once surveyed with evident disfavour the Druidical pillar—if, indeed, it were a Druidical pillar, a thought which did not occur to him. To him it was simply and starkly the Devil's Whistle, and he eyed it with disfavour, not because he disliked it in itself, but for quite other reasons. He liked that battered old grey stone well enough, because it was a familiar part of his familiar Paris, and because everything that was characteristic of Paris delighted him. But he eyed the ancient monument with disfavour, because it stood before the doors of a personage who did not appeal to him, a personage who seemed to regard the ancient monument as her own especial property, a personage, too, who was addicted to the unnecessary exhibition of good counsel. He ruminated sour, indigestible thoughts, and surveyed the Devil's Whistle sourly. He would have welcomed the strength of a giant, that he might have picked it up between his thumb and forefinger, and placed it elsewhere, in spite of the teeth of the homiletic female. Master François, confessing to himself angrily that he had not the strength of a giant, was suddenly illuminated by a magnificent idea. What he could not do single-handed, he could do many-

handed. Given the help of a rabble of lively lads, what were easier than to uproot the Devil's Whistle from its ancient lair, bear it to some spot in the heart of the student dominion, and thus prove triumphantly the fallibility of all old cats.

Master François drew nearer to the Druidic emblem and touched its rugged sides affectionately with somewhat dirty fingers. "You would be better elsewhere," he murmured, and while he murmured his nimble wit, leaping from point to point of the mountain-range of possibilities, began to dally with achievable delights. He gave the Devil's Whistle a playful slap on its weatherbeaten side, turned a look of malicious defiance at the windows of the homiletic lady's house, and betaking himself to his heels and toes with exceeding swiftness, he threaded the streets that lay between him and the world of students like a newly-begotten and bewinged Mercury. As he sped, his brain teemed, and by the time he reached his haunts he was pregnant with the plan of an amazing enterprise.

His idea did not, indeed, seem to him in after years such a master-thought as it appeared in its moment of inception. Then, in the heat and jollity of youth, it seemed as wonderful as anything recorded in ancient history. In a word, he proposed to rival the rape of Helen, the capture of the Golden Fleece, the theft of the Seven-Branched Candlestick; he proposed to carry off the Devil's Whistle and to set it up as a trophy and a glory in the students' quarter of the city. Promptly he gathered together the leading spirits of dare-devilment in the student world—René de Montigny, Guy Tabarie, and the rest of the reckless fellowship—and confided to their alert attention his daring and delightful scheme.

His joy was great to find that his proposition pleased his hearers no less than it had pleased himself. Their brains caught fire; their hearts glowed, and the fate of the Devil's Whistle was decided in a rapture. The conclave of conspirators against the peace of a worthy woman and the tranquillity of an ancient monument dispersed to carry in every direction the fiery torch. From all quarters the

learned and light-hearted youth of the University rallied to the call. The flower of the Four Nations rose to the occasion with a magnificent unanimity, and in a very short time the attack upon the Devil's Whistle was agreed to, elaborated and carried into effect.

A chosen company of lusty students, armed with pickaxes and mattocks and equipped with a sturdy wagon, made its way at dead of night to the dwelling of the homiletic dame. There, by the light of the moon, they dug and scraped and prised and wetted the earth with their sweat till they succeeded in rooting the Devil's Whistle from the soil wherein it had stood for so many centuries, and had with infinite pains and an elaborate mechanism of ropes and rollers transferred it to their cart, whereon they tugged it in triumph to their own quarter, and at further pains set it up in its new home.

The trick was done, and done very successfully, in the dead of night, and no one save those that were intimately concerned in the business was a penny the wiser. But by noon next day the thing was very different. By noon next day all Paris that was Paris was aware that the Devil's Whistle, for reasons best known to itself, had chosen to shift its quarters from the door-post of the respectable widow to the very heart of the students' quarter. The news was published generally by four different methods of publication. In the first place, by those that, going about their business betimes, were called upon by custom to pass the door of the respectable widow's domicile, and, in doing so, became aware, to their surprise, that the Devil's Whistle no longer occupied its familiar spot. In the second place, by those that being called by duty into the students' quarter, saw to their astonishment set up in the very heart thereof a Devil's Whistle that had certainly not been there yesterday. In the third place, by the respectable widow herself, who on learning in the morning the horrible knowledge that her dearly beloved Devil's Whistle had disappeared, straightway set up such a clamouring and caterwauling, squalling and bawling, hooting and tooting, shrieking and squeaking, as might have deafened half the city. Regard-

less of the crowd about her doors, the good lady raged and stamped and stormed as she surveyed the traces of last night's ruthlessness. The news was published in the fourth place by the students themselves.

They had kept watch around their dear piece of plunder all through the night, and when the morning came, they busied themselves with the decoration of their new idol. They festooned it with flowers; they set around it various symbolic offerings in the form of flagons of wine, empty flagons, musical instruments and volumes of the works of Master Ovid.

All this was very good, but François Villon, who was the Lord of Misrule and the humming head of the adventure, felt that it was not good enough. He loudly declared that the Devil's Whistle was the image of the ancient tutelary divinity of Paris, and that, in consequence, it was the duty of all true Parisians to pay it deference. Therefore he gave order that every citizen, and for the matter of that citizenness, who happened to pass by the spot where the Devil's Whistle stood should kneel respectfully before the stone for the space of three minutes while the students joined hands and danced and sang songs about their toy and its enforced devotees.

This suggestion was eagerly approved, speedily enforced. Indignant burgesses were hustled to their knees in front of the Devil's Whistle, and kept in humiliation for the prescribed period with threat of cuff or gift of clout. Such of the womankind as were pretty were permitted to buy freedom from the process of kneeling by submitting to a liberal allowance of kissing from the jolly students. As a consequence of these regulations a good many citizens went their ways from the new altar-place of the new idol with dusty knees, and a good many citizenesses with flaming cheeks and rumpled garments. And the jolly students enjoyed themselves immensely, singing themselves hoarse, dancing themselves footsore, drinking themselves maudlin, and kissing till their lips were sore. It was agreed on all sides that François Villon was no less and no other than a man of genius. With this opinion François cordially

agreed. He was ideally happy in the midst of all this noise and riot and jollity that his own wit had kindled, his own example set agoing. He liked the bustle and he liked the drinking, and he liked the kissing, and he liked seeing the fat burgesses of Paris whom he scorned grovelling on their knees before this stone image, meaningless now if ever it had a meaning.

CHAPTER XXIII

A FRIENDLY HINT

ALL this was delicious diversion and dissipation while it lasted, but it did not last so long untroubled as its disciples could have desired. One of the many tongues of Rumour whispered into the ear of the bereaved lady the strange tale of what had occurred to the Devil's Whistle. Straightway an indignant female flamed and raged before the officers of the Watch and forced them into motion somewhat unwillingly.

Their reluctance was not inexcusable. It was always an uncomfortable business for the forces of the Crown to proceed to extremities against the students of the University. The University claimed the right to exercise its own authority, unchallenged and unhampered, over the strange swarm that huddled under her wings. Alma Mater alone was qualified to condemn and chastise her sons for any offences they might commit. For another hand than hers to wield the rod of chastisement was a profanation not to be tolerated. Hence there were incessant squabbles between the representatives of the University on the one side and the representatives of the Crown on the other over any case in which a student was concerned, and so jealous was the University of its privileges, and so persistent in defending them when they appeared to be threatened, that the officers of the Watch were very chary indeed of laying hands upon a student, whatever his offence, because of the inevitable trouble that was bound to follow. No matter what a noted rogue the student might be, no matter how flagrant his offending, the University would not admit for a single moment that the ordinary authority of the city had

the slightest right to deal with his transgression or to punish the transgressor. The University had so strong a weapon in its armoury, in its power to suspend all lectures in the classes and all preaching in the churches, and was so ready to employ this weapon on the smallest provocation, that it generally gained the day in any conflict with lay authority.

The civic importance, however, of the Dame de Bruyères stood so high and the audacity of the students had been so insolent, that the hand of authority was compelled, however unwillingly, to act. A company of archers suddenly swooped down upon the unsuspecting merry-making students, rudely brushed them, with many buffets given and taken, from their spoil, and carried away the Devil's Whistle from its admirers. Lay authority did not, however, restore the purloined monument to the good lady who had so vehemently reclaimed it. Lay authority believed it would not long be allowed to remain in its original resting-place. Therefore, in order to its perfect safety, they carried the ancient monolith into the precincts of the very Palace of Justice itself, and regarded it with confidence as secure.

Their confidence was rash and unfounded. They had not reckoned with the temper of the student-world. Above all, they had not reckoned with the spirit of Master Villon. When the fugitive students had rallied after their rout, grumbling and cursing because they had been taken unawares and found so careless, it was François Villon who first suggested to them that there was no reason on earth why the matter should be allowed to rest where it was or that victory should be permitted to remain in the hands of the laity. While others were staring vacantly at each other, with faces stupid with despair or tumid with indignation, François, with nimble wit, was perceiving that in spite of appearances there was yet a chapter to be written in the stupendous and miraculous history of the Devil's Whistle. That his was the hand to write that history he had long since resolved. That his was the brain to conceive and the heart to create that now so necessary chapter

he did not doubt. Wherefore in a moment he had leaped upon a bench and stood there, a lithe, light figure, with peaked, eager face, commanding the attention of his bewildered fellows.

"How long," he began in a fine spirit of Ciceronian reminiscence, which was fiercely applauded by his hearers, "How long, at length, O Catilina, shall you be permitted to abuse our patience?"

Villon did not very clearly know what he meant when he spoke of Catilina, and neither did his audience, but he—and they to a man—took the word to be, as it were, the symbol of one or all of the many persons who had the presumption to think that the students of the University of Paris should not be permitted to do whatever they pleased and exactly as they pleased. Therefore, François' opening was as a bolt that went home to the gold. The plaudits that greeted it gave him time to think what he should say next. He swung abruptly from his apostrophe to an imaginary Catilina to a direct address to those about him.

"Friends and comrades," he resumed, "Free fellow-citizens of the divine Republic of Letters, I have a word for your ears that shall act as a cordial to your hearts. I need not waste any time in telling you what you are."

Here Villon, like a practised orator, proceeded immediately to do, and at great length, the very thing he had just said that he would not do.

"You are the lovers of the Muses." Here Villon lifted his gaze to the skies, as if he beheld a vision there of the divine Nine throned on clouds. "You are the lovers of the Graces." Here Villon affected to caress with liberal gesture an imaginary female form, and his audience, greatly tickled by this piece of pantomime, roared again. "You are, to be frank, lovers of the Seven Deadly Sins."

A bellow of enthusiastic agreement welcomed this pleasantry. It was curious to behold all that motley congregation of faces, handsome faces, ugly faces, wise faces, stupid faces—faces that were merely vicious and faces that were mainly benign, all puckered and twisted into a grin of satisfaction at the assurance that Villon had given them.

There is nothing that pleases collective youth—and of Villon's hearers most were young—than to be reminded that they are devils of fellows.

The effect of Villon's eloquence was instantaneous and flattering. The students buzzed about him, fluttering, exultant; he had but to raise a voice, to raise a finger, to compel their energy and direct their course. Both voice and finger were lifted, and in a twinkling François found himself dominating a flood of flaming faces, conjuring an echoing roar of voices.

"To the Palace!" he cried, and all about him the world seemed to reel with the volleyed shoutings of "To the Palace!" François leaped from his perch into the engulfing flood, and was borne away as by a winter-flooded torrent. There was a trampling and stamping of a thousand feet; there was the yelling and bellowing of a thousand lungs, and the rising tide of riot sluiced through the channels of the narrow streets in the direction of the Palace of Justice.

The flood gathered strength and volume as it flowed. Eager emissaries detached themselves from the main body and ran this way and that, beating up enthusiastic recruits for the insurgent army that was marching to the rescue of the Devil's Whistle.

That rescue was easily effected. The guardians of the Palace, who never dreamed of such audacity, were taken completely unawares, and could offer no practical resistance to the invading host. The students swarmed into the Palace, carrying its few defenders before them like corks upon a wave. The whereabouts of the precious monument was soon ascertained, after a little gentle pressure had been brought to bear on frightened officialdom, and in a very little time the Devil's Whistle was once more peregrinating the streets of Paris in a mule-cart, surrounded by an enormous mob of loungers, loafers, gapers, rowdies, and other good citizens that formed its astonishing escort back to the place where the students had originally set it up.

This time the victors were resolved that they would make

assurance doubly sure. Instigated by Villon, a trench was dug to receive the base of the monument. In this trench the Devil's Whistle was set and secured by a solid layer of plaster, and by a number of iron bars that bound it to the earth. Mad with exultation, the students jigged and capered, skipped and leaped around their now doubly precious, because doubly won, idol. It was draped anew with flowers, it was saluted anew with music; once again the passers-by had to pay it homage or to pay in person for reluctance; once again there was a great deal of kissing and tousling of pretty misses. All the place was alive with shrieks and squeaks and shouts, the squealing of flutes, the banging of tambourines. Mount Saint Hilary was the maddest pandemonium imaginable, not only for that day, but for many days to come.

For the students, growing fonder of their fun the more they savoured it, came to regard this festival of the Devil's Whistle as no mere transitory matter, but as a perpetual cult to be honoured by a perennial merry-making. The object of their adoration, like the Sacred Flame in ancient Rome, was never left unguarded or untended. By night as by day there were companies of jolly students disporting about it and bawling obscene songs in the praise of their amazing fetich.

But this kind of fun was not allowed to remain untroubled. The police of Paris might be reluctant to act against the revellers and rebels; but the good lady who had been for so long the unchallenged proprietress of the Devil's Whistle made such a fuss that civic authority felt bound, for the sake of its own dignity, to act. Accordingly it mustered its forces, and set out for the region of Mount Saint Hilary, with the very creditable intention of bringing the madcap students to their senses.

Unhappily for the peaceful assertion of civic authority those same madcap students were so lost to all sense of citizenship and decency as to do several very forward and naughty deeds. In the first place, they declined, very peremptorily, to surrender their dearly-loved Devil's Whistle to the good lady of La Bruyères, or rather to those of the

police who spoke in her name. In the second place, they invited the police, with more brevity than politeness, to go to the devil. In the third place, they continued to dance and to sing more furiously and more obscenely than ever.

The good citizens who represented civic force allowed themselves to lose their temper. They detested the students and all that the students represented as much as the students detested them and all that they represented. The law was on their side; they were present in considerable number; their blood was up; they resolved, or those that led them resolved for them, to go for the turbulent studentry and teach them what was what. The unfortunate thing was that the turbulent studentry had on their side a very similar devotion to that same teaching of what is what, which is, has been and ever will be, the crux of all conflicts. As a natural consequence, in a very few minutes the Mount St. Hilary was as much a battlefield as ever the Plain of Troy.

The scene on the Mount was exceedingly interesting, even amusing, to those persons who had the good fortune to be perched in upper windows commanding the field of battle. These peered from belfries and craned from gables, and enjoyed themselves to the full as much as if they had been witnessing the newest farce, foolery, or mystery. But to those that swayed and surged and flowed over the thronged cobblestones the interest, if quite as intense, was of a very different quality. What had begun as a silly, headstrong disputation had drifted swiftly from a brawl into a battle, from a matter of Town and Gown into a matter of life and death. Pates were cracked, sconces were rattled; in a twinkling blood was flowing from bruised faces and broken heads. And still the din continued—the rattling of staves, the clattering of swords, the shrill screams of defiance volleyed by the students, the hoarse and hurried commands of the civic forces.

The civic forces were rapidly losing their heads, and allowing themselves to regard what was no better than a petty squabble of wits and cits as if it were a sudden explosion of civil war. Had the English or the Armagnacs

been at the gates of Paris the nominal protectors of the peace could not have acted with a more unrestrained fury. They slashed at the turbulent students as if the safety of the realm depended upon the strength and effects of their blows; and the students on their side, goaded into warmer action by the ferocity of their opponents, gave back blow for blow with as keen a zeal as if they were Trojans in the trenches resisting the latest Greek assault. In the narrow thoroughfares all was huggermugger and hullabaloo; every hand brandishing a weapon that strove to assail or defend a head, every face flaming with rage, every voice bawling its loudest in the utterance of raucous cries of defiance, derision or command. The whole quarter was converted into a bubbling cesspool of raging passions, blatant language, and bitter deeds.

Villon was in the thick of it all, at once belligerent and discreet. While like a true Paris rascal, he enjoyed the noise and titillation of the scrimmage, and felt a pleasurable excitement in applying a thwack of his staff to any convenient hostile fleshiness, he had, at the back of his dancing brain, a comical and housewife-like prudence that conjured him in the midst of all the scuffling and tumult to take a great care of his own precious, delicate and essential personality. With senses sharpened to a needle-like fineness, he seemed at the same moment to see, hear, smell and taste all sources of danger, and to avoid them as nimbly as a flea avoids fingers. Thus in the very thickness and pressure of a belabouring crowd, he managed, somehow or other, to give blows without receiving them, and to feel like a hero and behave like a hero at the smallest possible personal expense. This was largely due, no doubt, to his comparatively diminutive stature, which enabled him to skip here and insinuate there, to glide and creep and slide and sidle and slip in a way that would have been impossible to a fellow of a bigger build. Whatever the reason for his surety, François was enjoying himself hugely, coupling the Homeric sense of delight in battle with the comfortable sense of being able to dodge danger; and as long as these two elements were compatible François did not care how

long the conflict over the Devil's Whistle might be pleased to rage. So he thwacked and slapped and smacked and banged as if no other business had been allotted to him in all God's world, and even as he performed these thwackings and slappings and bangings and smackings, he was exhilarated by a feverish sense of his own cunning and dexterity in having so much fun with such ever to be praised and blessed impunity.

Unhappily, as we learn from the sayings of the devout and learned, and almost as poignantly from personal experience, few earthly pleasures are of long endurance. In the very prime of the muss, at the very heat of the hubbub, there came a sudden and ugly change in the game. Somebody on the edge of the tussle said something which somebody else caught up, and what he said flickered like a flame over the fighting throng and shrieked its message horridly into startled ears. "The soldiers." Those were the words that seemed to race from lip to lip, and in their passage to paralyse the pleasure of as brisk a Town and Gown row as Paris streets had seen and heard for many a long day.

In a moment everything was changed. There was a great stamping and trampling and clattering; there was a fierce gleaming of steel, and lo and behold! a levy of Royal Archers had hurled itself into the medley, and was scouring all its component parts before them. While the belaboured watchmen gladly fell back within the shelter afforded by the new-comers, the students and their allies began to tumble away in all directions, slipping over the cobbles like spilt water, to seek safety in every sideway and alley. After them came the soldiers close at their heels, hammering at heads and shoulders with the flats of their halberds. Thus they dealt out a maximum of hurt with a minimum of damage. After all, these same halberdiers were for the most part Parisians too, and their hearts were not ferociously hot against their fellow-citizens. So if their blows were lusty and stung, they were not to be called cruel, and, like the hard words of the proverb, they broke no bones. But they had emphatically the

quality desired of them by their leader. They stilled the tumult, they dispersed the mob, they cleared the street as if it had been cleared by a whirlwind. It was plain that when it came to an issue authority was stronger than uproar and turbulence in the good city of Paris.

François, swiftly aware of the change of things, was dodging and ducking before the onslaught, and looking to right and left of him for the best opportunities for succour or sequestration, when his hurriedly-formed desire for flight was astonishingly arrested. He was suddenly aware of a gigantic figure, carried upon a gigantic horse, that made for him through all the press and medley as if with the express intention of riding him down and trampling him into a jelly. Then, before Villon's wits could rally enough to formulate any plan of escape, the fiery breathing of the charger was hot upon his neck, and the next moment, as François expected to feel the iron hooves pounding him out of humanity, a hand that seemed as strong as the hand of Destiny gripped him hard by the collar of his jerkin. There was a fierce, stern pull, and François found himself rising from his mother earth as if he had been suddenly accorded the unlikely favour of wings. Then followed a lateral jerk, and François, to his intense astonishment, found himself lying face downwards across the forepart of a monstrous horse, and being held in that position by the pinning force of the grip that had uplifted him from the street. François, having nothing better to do, accepted the situation, and in another moment he was being galloped in a very uncomfortable attitude down a street that was now empty of all but the new-come soldiers and the gradually rallying watchmen.

To Villon that same gallop seemed to last for an age-long time, but, as a matter of fact, it was only a few moments before it came to a halt as abruptly and unexpectedly as it had begun. As the gigantic charger stopped in its course the gigantic rider dismounted with an ease that was surprising in one of his bulk, and as he dismounted he took François, whom his grasp had never relinquished, with him and set him squarely on his feet.

François, staring and gaping, found himself face to face with Messire Robert d'Estouteville, Provost of Paris.

François, who had expected he knew not what doom of destruction to fall upon him, could scarcely credit his senses.

"Messire Robert," he stammered, feeling suddenly sure that he was in luck's way, and yet unable all at once to realize his luck.

Messire Robert d'Estouteville grinned at Master François' evident show of relief, but the grin was swiftly succeeded by a frown at the young man's behaviour. Messire Robert was an official; Messire Robert represented authority, and no amount of personal friendship could wholly condone defiance of the representatives of the king's majesty.

"It is lucky for you, my young friend," said Messire Robert, at once gruff and good-humoured, "that I caught sight of you as I came into the shindy. I should not like you to come to hurt, lad, for the old sake's sake."

Master François, a little dizzy from careering on his stomach across the neck of the monumental animal that Messire Robert was holding by the bridle, smiled a somewhat wan and vacant smile, and looked about him. The street was swept clear of strife; here and there to right and left he could discern a few poor disputants limping off and nursing their bruises. Messire d'Estouteville's men, a huddle of glittering steel, were standing complacently at their ease. It was plain to his apprehension that the sport was over, that the game was up, that the Iliad of the Devil's Whistle had come to the last line of the book lettered Omega. His heart broadened as he looked upon the stern but not unamiable countenance of Messire Robert, and he experienced a cheering sense of satisfaction as he perceived that his patron and captor had set him on his feet under the sign of the best-reputed tavern in the neighbourhood. When a man that takes you riding against your will sets you on your legs at the door of a wine house it is easy odds that he means hospitality. Villon licked his lips.

His pleasurable anticipations were promptly justified. Messire Robert beckoned his sergeant to his side; instructed him to let his men wait at ease; and then taking Villon by the shoulder, pushed him into the tavern. An obsequious host hurried forward, vastly flattered by the presence under his roof of so great a man as the Provost of Paris. Messire Robert commanded him to show the way to a private room, and this being done, ordered wine. Messire Robert made no swaggering demand for the best wine in the cellar. He knew very well that the host would keep nothing worth drinking unbroached while the Provost of Paris was within his walls.

Presently, wine on table, host withdrawn, door closed, Messire Robert and François found themselves facing one another; Messire Robert seated at the table, splendid in steel, François standing before him by the fireplace with very much the air of a truant schoolboy in the presence of an indignant master. Messire Robert made a sweeping gesture with his hand which implied a desire that François should take a seat at the table. François promptly obeyed. Messire Robert poured out two full measures of wine, and solemnly saluting Villon, lifted his cup and drained it deliberately. François was brisk to follow his example, and shuddered with pleasure as the wine gurgled down his gullet. There was a wine, if you please, a wine to sip, to drink, to swig, and having swigged, to hymn reverentially, a wine for the palates of Anacreon or Horace, a wine to set the fancy of the drinker deliciously free, a wine without the hint of a headache in it, drank you never so steadily. Master François' spirits soared to the Seventh Heaven of pleasure, only to descend therefrom with astonishing swiftness as he lowered his cup and faced the countenance of Messire Robert d'Estouteville.

"My lad," said the Provost, "it is a saying that there is no use reasoning with a fool in his folly, and this seems to be the case with you. Time was when I liked you well, and made you welcome. Now I refuse you my house, now I shut my door in your face. And why? Because you are a rascal and a rogue."

It is a curious fact in human nature that many a man may take great pride in his rascality and his roguishness, and yet also take great offence at being ticketed with the nouns that assert his cherished qualities. These are the inconsistencies of man, and Villon was plainly inconsistent, for he flushed very red.

"My lord," he said, as loudly as he dared in such a presence, "you speak hard words hardly."

The Provost of Paris was as much impressed by Villon's indignation as he would have been by the barking of a small dog.

"You were once a decent fellow enough," he said, "but nowadays what are you? A gambler, a sot, a frequenter of loose company, a drabber. You may be worse, for all that I know. You will be worse, I am very certain, for the way you are walking is all down hill. You are very surely no fit guest-friend for the Provost of Paris or for the Provost's wife."

Villon's lips tightened in anger, but they loosened again swiftly, for Villon still had a great respect for Messire Robert.

"I am young," he said, with an expression of weary patience, "and I practise the pleasures of youth. You were young yourself once, Messire, and should be considerate."

This was impertinence, for the Provost was still well under forty, and was as strong and healthy as a prize bull. But Messire Robert did not seem to appreciate the impertinence. François spoke again.

"Boys will be boys," he suggested.

Messire Robert looked gravely at Master François and shook his head. It was very plain that he was displeased with his former page and go-between. François wondered why people were so foolish as to show displeasure at the necessary gaiety of youth.

"My young friend," he said, "you are permitting your temper to outrun your discretion. To be frank with you, it seems to me that if you are not very careful you will come to a bad end."

Master François was understood to suggest that he had not intended any serious harm and had not, after all, done any serious harm.

Messire Robert elevated his eyebrows.

"Not done any harm," he repeated, with an air of astonishment on his face that seemed comic to Villon in spite of the peril of his case. "Not done any harm. Do you call exasperating an ancient and honourable lady until she is well-nigh crazy not doing any harm? Do you call purloining a heathen obelisk from its place at her gates, and making virtuous burgesses pay it homage as if they were so many pagans, not doing any harm? Do you call brawling with the watch, the said brawl causing the death incidentally of a harmless spectator, not doing any harm? My young friend, I am shocked at you; I am ashamed of you."

"Students are always frolicsome," Villon suggested, "and the temptation to steal the image was very great. It seemed so foolishly out of place at the door of that old woman, and it must surely be happier in the company of joyous fellows who girdled it with flowers, carried it in triumph through the streets and drank wine in its honour. I admit that the business of the Whistle was my business, but I cannot admit that I am to blame because the watch was mishandled or because a looker-on came to his death. These two contrarieties would never have occurred if the gentlemen of the Watch had kept themselves to themselves and not interfered with the students in their mirth."

Messire Robert deprecated such insufficient defences with a Jove-like shake of negation.

"You stray from the straight path and the plain way," he asserted. "If you choose to play the fool and bloodshed comes of it, you cannot save your skin by pretending that you meant no harm. If you light a fire to warm your fingers, and if the faggot you have carelessly kindled sets fire to a church and consumes the sacred building, it will scarcely serve you to urge that you felt chilly."

Master François thought that the argument of Messire Robert was sadly lacking in logical application; but as

Messire Robert represented the inexorable logic of force he kept his opinion discreetly to himself, which evidenced that for a featherhead he had some store of shrewdness.

"Alas!" he said, "I have done wrong unwittingly, and shall ever lament the consequences of my folly."

He would have said more, but Messire Robert interrupted him with some brusqueness and asperity. This was because he was going to do François a good turn, and felt that he ought to cloak it with a certain official truculence.

"My young friend," he said sternly, "you have got yourself into a precious pickle; but by my patron saint, Saint Christopher, I have not the heart to be hard upon you. I cannot lightly forget the good turns you did me when you made those rhymes for my dear love that is now my dear lady. Wherefore for this once I will consent to overlook your offence against the dignity of the law, the decorum of the city, and the king's majesty."

Villon was all for thanking him fervently, with tears of gratitude in his eyes; but Messire Robert, who was not a man of sentiment, cut him short abruptly.

"I perceive," he said, "a window opening on to a street behind this inn. It would be a long jump and a risky jump, and if you did it unaided you would peril your neck, or at least a leg, and so be at no better advantage. But if I give you the help of the length of my arm it will be an easy matter, leaving you free and nimble to give me leg-bail."

François again essayed to express gratitude, and again Messire Robert cut him short.

"But I hope," he continued, "that you clearly understand that this is the last time that I shall consent to strain the king's justice to serve your turn. You have behaved very ill; you deserve little mercy, and you may thank your stars that I came along to-day. Take warning, if you can. Mend your ways or you may come to regret it. The next time I find you breaking the peace, by the Lord of Heaven you shall suffer for it just as if you were any Tom, Dick or Harry."

Messire Robert d'Estouteville meant what he said for the moment, being a man of few ideas. And Master François, aware of this paucity, felt uncomfortably convinced that it really was high time to turn over a new leaf. But even as he was, like the Pious Æneas, revolving many cares in his mind, Messire Robert, who was swift in deed if slow in thought, took dramatic action. One stride took him to the window; one stroke flung it open. A second stride brought him close to François, whom he picked up by the collar, at once as firmly and as gingerly as a lady cat carries a kitten, and in another instant François was swung through the open window and hung suspended in the void.

"Look out!" said the voice of Messire Robert above him, and as he spoke Messire Robert leaned far out of the little window and lowered François as near to Mother Earth as he could. Then he loosened the grip of his fingers, and François, who was keeping himself as supple as possible on purpose, dropped lightly to the ground.

François darted off as swiftly down the narrow street as a lizard nips into a crevice. Messire Robert, lolling his huge bulk out of the window, watched him disappear with a smile that was not entirely unenvious of the agility of his youth. Then he withdrew himself into the room, and seating himself anew at the table, finished at his leisure the excellent wine that the host had provided.

When this was done he rose, stretched himself, and clanked down the stairs. At the foot he found the host, more obsequious than ever, to whom he tossed a broad piece. Then he passed into the open and signalled to his sergeant, who hastened to his side.

"That fellow," said Messire Robert d'Estouteville, indicating with a jerk of his thumb over his shoulder the individual who had accompanied him into the inn, "is a truly desperate character. No sooner were we alone, and I proceeding to cross-examine him, in the hope of getting at the bottom of this business, than in a trice he fell upon me, for all the world as if he were a roaring lion, and before you could say kiss-my-heel he had me laid out on the floor and well-nigh senseless. Then, taking advantage

of my helpless condition, he nipped out of the window, or so I suppose, for when I came to my senses again he had vanished."

As Messire Robert said all this he looked very hard at his sergeant, and his sergeant, listening, looked very hard at him, the steel-clad Goliath who was his superior officer. And because he was his superior officer he accepted without apparent question the statement that a wisp of a student had succeeded in downing the strongest man-at-arms in all Paris.

As Master François scudded along over the cobbles, he found that his spirit was twisted this way and that by conflicting emotions. His first and most creditable feeling was one of gratitude to Messire Robert for having given him his liberty. His second and most assertive feeling was one of anger. If he was blessing Messire Robert in one breath for setting him free, he was cursing him in the next for his unreasonable harshness in forbidding him his house. "What a world it is," thought François as he sped to cover, "where a little light-hearted jollity and crisp fun make the Big-Wigs pull such long faces and behave so beastly."

Then he thought, with a clutch of the heart, of all that Messire Robert's verdict would mean to him.

He had grown so familiar in his privilege to frequent the Estouteville house that the thought of losing such sweet and comely usage chilled him.

There, always, was a haven from the tavern and the brothel; there, always, he might scrape shoulders with men of less wit than himself who had made cunninger use of their wisdom. There he could see men wearing and airing the success that might have been his—if only he had been somebody else and not mad François Villon, who would always pawn a golden future for a pinchbeck present with a drink and a kiss in it. There he encountered Men of the Robe and Men of the Sword whose names were famous or whose pockets were full; men whom he found foolish and who took him for a fool. But, best of all, for him in his frequenting of the Estouteville mansion was the

glorious golden fact that there he could feast on the beauty of Ambroise, there speak with her at his ease on pleasant terms of friendship. He had always assured himself, ever since those purple days of Saumur, that Ambroise was the Queen of his Soul.

He was never silly enough to give her a glimpse into his mind, to throw a hint of his thoughts. Just he was content with his silent worship. It was a worship that did not hinder him from any pleasures or hamper him in alien gallantries. He drank and diced his way through life; he loved lightly here and there; but he was hotly persistent to assure himself that these trifles were the inevitable and unimportant adjuncts to a man's life, and no barrier to his spiritual wanderings in the Garden of the Mystic Rose where Ambroise d'Estouteville reigned her reign.

And now he was to lose all this; now the doors of the house of Messire Robert were to be slammed; now his Garden of the Mystic Rose, weed-grown indeed and thorn-girdled, but still a garden, was robbed of its queen. Drink and debauchery had not so toughened the texture and muddied the colour of his mind that he could not now feel as if the fabric of his life was in ruins if he might never again gaze on the face of Ambroise or hear her voice.

That seemed the melancholy inevitable conclusion of his cogitations. He knew Messire Robert well enough to be sure that he would not change his mind in a hurry, would not indeed change it at all, so long as François continued to live the life that he had learned to love. Mournfully he recognized that he would continue to live that life; that under the conditions there was no other life left for him to live. He wondered if Ambroise would pity him a little, if she would miss him at all. He wished with all the strength of a spirit not wholly degraded that it were in his power to do her some service, to prove his devotion.

CHAPTER XXIV

A MEETING AT MONTFAUCON

FOR some little time after this interview with Messire Robert, François cherished, or rather nourished, a mental distress which he strove to exorcise, banish, or at least stupefy, by various means. The most obvious were facile instruments of dissipation, wine and bad company. The most honourable was the composition of that mirific and pyramidal epic celebrating the business of the Devil's Whistle, of which Guy Tabarie made fair copies, and which, shuffled from hand to hand and studied in hilarious privacy, earned for the anonymous author—for François was discreet enough to keep his name from its pages—quite a number of friendly admirers. Between the muse on the one hand, and a Margot or so on the other, François managed, for a time, to keep himself entertained and out of serious mischief. But black care can straddle a Pegasus behind the liveliest riding rhymester, and François was too familiar with the pictures of the Danse Macabré at the Innocents not to be most lively aware of the sinister figures that move unseen in every company of revellers and grin at the profligate over the whitest shoulders in the world.

In a word, François was hipped, François was dismal; he could not stifle an uneasy consciousness that all was not well with him; that he was not so merry as he pretended to be, and that a certain kind of kisses tasted sour. He had put Messire Robert's warning to the proof by presenting himself one fine day at the house that had once been so hospitable, only to be informed by Gilbert, with a face of unusual gravity, that neither his lord nor his lady

could give themselves the pleasure of receiving him. François read plainly on the old soldier's face, what he did not learn definitely from the old soldier's lips, that the politely-worded refusal to receive was no passing order of a day, but a final business, a definite shutting-off of a world that had once been willing to welcome him.

François swung away with his head high and his bonnet tilted at a defiant angle. He assured himself that he did not care a rap; that respectable gentry made woefully dull company; that it was better to sprawl in a tavern with a jolly doxy on your knee than to dress in your best and make antechamber for the privilege of kissing the fingertips of a lady of high degree. But the assurances did not succeed in cheering him as he had hoped, and many hours of inebriety did not mend matters whether with his head or with his heart or with his stomach.

Now while François was still in this uncomfortable temper, being still compelled to regret what he had lost and unable to reconcile himself with contentment to the loss, it came to his ears that there was a hanging toward at Montfaucon, on the day of the Feast of the Blessed Saint Aloyisia. Precisely at the time and hour of this hanging there was a lecture at the Sorbonne, which it was certainly the duty of François, as it should have been his pleasure, to attend. But François had long sloughed all sense of respect or obligation to the University and his studies, and to sit cooped in a dull room listening to dull words was infinitely less to his irritated mind than a fine free hanging on Montfaucon gibbet. Jolly lads would be there of his own gang and other gangs—for the bloods of Paris made it their business to attend such ceremonials; also, there would be pretty lasses. Already he had gauged the value of pretty lasses, and though he talked big of his amours—and he always nowadays talked big about anything that concerned himself, finding, for one thing, that it mightily impressed others—he knew that they were trivial and pitiful enough, having no kinship with true love or high passion, and in his heart he sighed for finer adventures. But no great lady cast an eye on him that ever he could see,

and as for the one great lady he had known and worshipped, she was no better than an Olympian vision for a discredited, exiled ragamuffin. Wherefore his vague longing for a vaguer ideal of love remained unsatisfied.

François tossed duty to the devil and went to the hanging in the company of a rabble of the choicest rascallions from the Four Nations. The rabble included Guy Tabarie, and did not include René de Montigny, who professed to consider such a form of holiday-making to be unworthy of his dignity. The matter of the hanging was simple enough. It was for robbery on the highway, attempted too near the walls of Paris, and inopportunely interrupted by the Watch. What was curious about the business was, as the rumour ran, that the brigand had a kinswoman that was on friendly terms with the Sergeant of Archers that had captured him, and that the gaol-bird was from the first confident that this alliance would save him from the gallows. In the which, as it seemed, the malefactor was deceived, for the hanging was appointed without qualification.

There was a good plenty of people of all sorts at Montfaucon; enough to afford François and Tabarie and their companions a deal of pleasure in hustling a way through them, with linked elbows, to the vicinity of the gallows. But in spite of their efforts the crowd was too much for them and broke them up, and François was by himself when he arrived near the Tree.

Round the gibbet stood a little line of archers, eyeing, with the sour disdain of soldier for civilian, the crowd that pressed as near them as it dared. Along the road from Paris wound the grim procession; the hangman on his cart with his prisoners behind him—for there was more than one to suffer that day—and the soldiers in the van and the soldiers in the rear, and the Sergeant of Archers riding at the head of it all, carrying himself as proudly as if he had been a peer of Charlemagne. Villon knew him very well; indeed, there were few in Paris of any consequence, high or low, whose name and history were not familiar to François. He was, or said he was, Poltrot de Haucqueton, very comely, very cunning, and a great lover of the fair.

He laid a claim to good birth, which was indifferently accepted, and he was content to air his pretensions to nobility in the guard-room and the tavern. He was very much the kind of gentleman whom a great lord might pitch upon if he were looking about him for a likely and reliable assassin. In the meantime he represented the State in a subordinate position.

Villon watched him malevolently as he rode by, with the sunlight on his weapons, on his self-satisfied face, on his showy clothes and his sturdy horse. He heartily cursed the Sieur de Haucqueton for a nincompoop—all men being nincompoops that were not of the University and of the circle of Villon's cronies therein—and then turned his attention to the prisoners in the cart. A little group of three women were standing by the roadside, quite near to the gallows, three bright spots of colour, blue and red and yellow. François had paid little heed to them up to now, for their heads were huddled together, and he could not see their faces; but now his attention was brought to them, or to one of them, more insistently. When the Sergeant of the Archers came to where the girls were standing he reined in his horse, and one of the three, the one that was in blue, came forward from her companions and spoke to him and he spoke to her, leaning low down from his saddle to do so, while the soldiers gave over their prisoners to the hangman and his assistants. Then the captain lifted the girl to his saddle-bow and seated her there, very comfortable, in front of him.

François could not see her plainly even now, but he could discern that she was very comely of figure, her slim body closely moulded in the gown of azure stuff that was all powdered over with little silver stars. Her hair was yellow, and he made a guess that her eyes were blue, and she looked whimsically virginal of mien. She showed much more splendid than most of the women in the crowd, and yet for all her splendour he was very sure that she was no great lady, and he had little doubt that she was the woman he had heard tell of that was the friend of Poltrot de Haucqueton. He wished he could see her face, but,

as he could not, he turned his attention to the condemned men who were being taken out of the cart. The most conspicuous of these was a big brute of a fellow that seemed, and was, heavy with liquor. His head hung upon his breast at first, but at the murmur of the crowd that greeted him he lifted his face to stare about him, and then François gave a great gasp of surprise. For the staring face was a familiar face—it was the face of the Burgundian soldier whom he had known in his childhood long ago, whom he had seen again at Saumur, a great while later and yet long ago too, as it seemed to him now. The sudden sight of that brutal, sodden face seemed to illuminate the mind of François. With a great effort he succeeded in pushing his way near to where the girl in blue sat on the sergeant's horse, and looking up at her got a clear view of her, sideways, and saw, as he knew he should see, the face of Huguette.

There was no shade of sorrow on Huguette's face; she watched the tragedy with dry eyes, and when it came to the Burgundian's turn to be hung, she laughed loudly and clapped her hands. The doomed man heard her mirth, and he stumbled as he went and looked at her bemusedly. He was not sober; as François had noted, his gaolers had plied him with drink, partly out of good nature and partly to make him the easier to handle, he being a big man and strong for his years. But the girl's laughter seemed to sober him for a moment, and he glared at her where she sat, on the gay horse with the strong arm about her, and she glared back at the man, and François had a violent mind-picture of two fiends that were fighting a duel with forked lightning for their falchions. Then the Burgundian was duly trussed and swung and done for, and as he dropped and one of the hangmen caught at his heels to finish him, again the girl laughed and again the girl clapped her hands.

The ceremonial was over; the executioners gathered together their belongings; the bulk of the crowd dispersed; only a few remaining to stare at the gaunt bodies swinging black against the sky. François gave a little shiver, and

then grinned elfishly to show the world that no sentimentality could wring his cynical philosophy. He looked about for Huguette and found her in a twink. She had slipped down from her seat on the saddle of the Sieur de Haucqueton, and had joined her mates in red and yellow. The Sieur de Haucqueton rallied his men for the return to Paris. He saluted Huguette with his sword as he rode away, and Huguette smiled and blew him a kiss.

François advanced towards the girls. They stared at him as he approached, because he was quite unknown to them, and because he was shabbily clad and looked meagre and needy—all of which, indeed, he was—and scarcely of the kind from which they might expect advances. But he bore himself as jauntily before these bright she-creatures as if he were habited in cloth of gold and rattled king's counters in his pockets.

He made the girl in the blue gown a ceremonious bow.

"Will Huguette," he asked, "grant a few moments' speech to a humble student of the University of Paris that is happy to greet her again?"

"You make very free with my name, learned sir," the girl said quizzically. "Who gave it to you to play with?"

"There was a time when it was familiar to my lips," François answered gaily; "but I fear you have forgotten me and my name together. Yet there was a time when we were great playmates."

The girl came a little nearer to him, looking at him closer, and then she clapped her hands again, an action that seemed incidental to her satisfaction. Her companions the while, red gown and yellow gown, stood apart and tittered.

"Why, it is François!" she cried, "little François, little François Villon!" and she laughed gleefully.

"It is even he, no more and no less," François answered. For all his cheerful effrontery, there was an odd tenderness in his regard, which seemed to surprise Huguette and to divert her companions. François was not easily disconcerted, but under the circumstances the persistent giggling of the other girls went some way to disconcert him more

than he liked to admit, and he would gladly have slapped them for their impudence. Like many another jester that makes the world his target, he was far from being unsusceptible to any ridicule directed at himself.

As for Huguette, she kept on staring at him in a patent amazement that was plainly blended with pleasure, and a very pretty natural colour came into her cheeks that put to shame such artifice of red and white as she had set there.

"It is a long day since we met," said Huguette in a more friendly tone, "and you do not seem to have thriven so well in the interval as others."

She glanced, as she spoke, from his rusty apparel to her own finery. "Well," she questioned, "what do you want with me, little François?"

The head of François was in something of a whirl at this sudden adventure, and his heart was thumping in company, for he was stirred and troubled anew by that strange resemblance which might perhaps have escaped eyes that were not the eyes of a lover.

"I want some private speech with you, Huguette," he began, "and that as soon as may be. There may be advantage in it for you."

Again the girl's glance travelled carelessly over the shabby garments of François, and she may very well have wondered what advantage it was in the power of so out-at-elbows a gallant to offer. But she smiled obligingly on her former playfellow, and held out a hand in friendship.

"It would be graceless in me to deny so old a comrade," she said. "I was going home with these my friends, but now they can fare for themselves and I will walk with you." She named the girls with a gesture of the hand towards each. "This is Yolande, and this Denise. They are merry minxes, as you see, but good fellows enough to their patrons who are well-to-do."

She laughed as she spoke, and then Yolande and Denise sheered off and went their way, and François found himself walking by the side of Huguette over the now well-nigh deserted fields in the direction of the city. It was

staggeringly strange, this unexpected companionship. François had many things to say, and so for a little while he was silent, not knowing what thing to say first.

"Well," the girl said presently, "for one that had much to say you seem tongue-tied."

"I have much to say," François answered, "and much to ask, and scarcely know where to begin. But first of all I want to know why you came here to-day, and why you laughed and clapped your hands when they——"

He paused and Huguette swung on her heel and looked steadily at the gallows, and there was a great hate in her glance.

"I hated him," she said; "I hate him. Though he is dead and damned, I hate him."

François was almost startled by the ferocity of her voice.

"Why did you hate him?" he asked, though indeed he could make shift to guess. The girl caught him up.

"I hated him because he was a devil. He was cruel to me. He wronged me shamefully. I was glad to see him hanged."

"He saved your life in the beginning," François whispered.

"Yes," said the girl bitterly, "and I could have saved his life in the end, but I would not. He saved my life, but think what he did with me."

She shuddered and spat upon the ground. "Let us talk no more of him," she ordered fiercely.

By this time Master François seemed to have slipped back into the old days, when Huguette was a little child and his pretty tyrant. It was easy to understand why a woman might hate such a one as the Burgundian, and he nodded his head sympathetically.

Huguette banished her angry mood and laughed.

"And what else does your worship want of me?" she asked.

"I want to know where you live," François answered, "and when I know that I want to go there with you."

"There are many of your mood," she mocked, "who make a braver show in the streets."

Villon was too earnest to be put by. "I want to visit you," he protested, "for the sake of old times."

The girl laughed a little maliciously.

"I call myself a cap-maker," she said, "and I lodge in the street of the Golden Heron. You will know the house by the sunflowers that are carved about the doorway. Come with me now, if so you please, and I will hear what you have to say, for the old sake's sake."

While Huguette and François made their way to the street of the Golden Heron, they talked of their common childhood, capping recollections, recalling old pleasures, old pains, till the years seemed to vanish and they were again in the darkness of Mother Villon's dingy room. But because of the crowd in the streets and the consequent difficulty of keeping up an uninterrupted conversation, Villon said nothing of the much he had to say until they came to a halt in the street where Huguette lived.

Huguette beat at the door of the House of the Sunflower, which was opened by a red-faced old woman. François followed Huguette up the stair into a room that was handsomely furnished enough, with good Arras on the walls and vessels of silver on the sideboard. The girl pointed to a seat, but she stood herself and faced him with wide, inquiring eyes. As he looked at her he knew that she was very fair in her gown of blue and silver, and once again, in spite of the denial of her eyes, the virginal slimness of her figure thrilled him in defiance of wisdom.

Huguette noted the admiration in his gaze, and was pleased by it, and yet puzzled by it a little too, for it lacked the animalism of aspect with which she was familiar. She rested one hand against the shelf of the fireplace and another on her hip, and looked at him curiously.

"Little François," she said with a half-laugh, "it is many a long year since you and I have come face to face."

"It is long enough," answered François, "but not so long as you think."

The girl wrinkled her pretty forehead in surprise.

"What do you mean?" she asked. "I have never set eyes on you since we were children together."

"You may not have set eyes on me," replied François, "but indeed I have set eyes on you, and that, by token, not only once but twice."

He paused in enjoyment of her puzzled face.

"How so?" and the sound of her voice as she questioned showed no less than the expression of her face that she was indeed puzzled.

"Do you remember the festival which King René gave at Saumur, now a good many years ago?" François questioned.

Huguette nodded.

"I remember it," she said. "I have good reason to remember it."

"And so have I," said François, "for I was there in the thick of it all, and I saw you dance one day in a meadow by the river near the tilt-yard."

"I have danced half over the world since those days," Huguette said, with a queer sadness in her voice; "but I remember that dancing-day in Saumur, for it was the only day that I did dance there."

"I was in the throng that watched you dancing," said François, "and when all was over I wished to make friends with you again; but my purpose was interrupted at the time, and thereafter, though I sought for you, I could not find you again."

"No," the girl agreed, and repeated what she had said before: "I did not dance again in Saumur."

"But though I could not find you when I sought you," François continued, "it was my chance to see you again when I did not seek you."

"I do not think that can very well be," said Huguette decidedly, "for he that had me in charge"—she gave a little shiver and hurriedly crossed herself—"took very good care that I should not be seen abroad."

"Yet the thing is so," François persisted. "Do you remember one night in that hovel by the Gallows Square in Saumur when you took part in a mummery for the mystification of an honest and amorous gentleman?"

Huguette's eyes widened as recollection kindled with the words of François, and she laughed softly.

"Dear Lord," said she, "I remember very well. I sang a song and I came through a curtain and leaned across a sword, and there were coloured flames that burned with a sharp perfume. I was dressed, as I recall, in a gown of blue and silver, and I liked the hues so well that they have been my favourite wear ever since. There was a man on his knees with a white, staring face, and I flung him a trinket which my master had given me to fling, and I called to him, as I was told to call, that I loved him and him only, and then he sprang to his feet and the lights went out."

"Did you know what was the meaning of the mystery?" François questioned.

Huguette shook her head.

"I had and have no notion," she said, "of why I did what I did that night. In those days I did as I was told, and had learned from experience the wisdom of obedience and asking no questions." As she spoke she wriggled in expressive suggestion of painful reminiscences. "But you," she continued, "how did you come to know of all this?"

"Because I spied at the window through a slit I made in the curtain with my dagger," François explained.

"Then do you know the meaning of the hocus-pocus?" Huguette asked eagerly.

François looked wise.

"Maybe I do," he admitted. "All in good time. Tell me now what led up to the playing of this jest?"

"There came a man to my tyrant," Huguette replied, "a man in black whose face I did not see, for it was hidden in a hood. This man and my tyrant talked for a long while apart in another room, and when their talk was ended the man in black went away, and my tyrant told me that I was not to dance any more in Saumur, which surprised me, for the folk liked my dancing——"

"Well they might," François interpolated. Huguette gave him an amicable nod, and continued:

"And I made money by it, and the Burgundian beast was always greedy of money that he might turn it into wine. Nay, further, I was not suffered to stir abroad any more,

but made to keep indoors. Then my tyrant brought me the dress of blue and silver which he had bought at a fripster's in the town and taught me to play the part you saw me play."

"What happened," asked François, "that night when the foolery ended and the light was quenched? At that point, to be candid, I judged it best to take to my heels."

"My master caught hold of me," said Huguette, "and dragged me through the darkness out of the hovel by a back door and bade me run with all speed to the shelter of a little wood that lay some half a mile away, and there to wait for him. I did so and crouched there in the darkness, waiting, and as I waited I wished, I remember, that there might be robbers in that wood who would find me and take me away, so that I might have a change from my Burgundian master. But there were no robbers, or at least I saw none, and presently my tyrant came for me and took me back to the house. It was empty by now. The lord that had knelt and stared was gone, and so was he in the white robe that had helped in the jugglery, and whom I supposed to be the visitor in black. My Burgundian was in good spirits, from which I should have guessed that he had made money, if I had not later, when he thought I was asleep, seen and heard him counting broad gold pieces. And the next morning at cock-crow we set off on our travels again."

François had listened to this narrative with the keenest interest and attention.

"And what," he asked, "became of the man in black?"

Huguette shrugged her slim shoulders.

"How should I know?" she responded. "I never saw him again, if indeed I can rightly say that I ever saw him at all, seeing that I know no more of him than that he was habited in black."

"And you and your Burgundian ruffian?" François interrogated.

The girl's face darkened.

"We wandered the world at all adventure," she said. "I could make money for him, by my dancing—and otherwise.

Well, I made money for him. Always I hated him. I would have left him but that I was afraid of him, for he always swore that if I played him false he would kill me; and because I was very young and as foolish as my years I believe that I believed him. Indeed, he would not have scrupled to keep his word. But when we drifted to Paris a while ago, by good luck I took the fancy of that same gay Sergeant of the Watch that you saw to-day. So when my tyrant got into trouble, Poltrot de Haucqueton came to me and asked me if it was my wish that he should be saved from the gallows. You may be very sure that I said no, and so he was hanged to-day, and I thankful to be there and see the hanging of him."

François nodded his head. He felt sympathetic enough, though it was odd to hear so sweet-looking a creature speak so fiercely. For a space there was silence between them. Then François rose to his feet with a great air of determination on his face.

"Huguette," he protested, "I hope and believe that it shall prove to your good fortune that you and I have met this day after so long a parting. When can I see you to-morrow? It may be that I shall have something to tell that may be worth the telling and the hearing."

"You may take it that I do not rise very timely, little François," Huguette averred with a significant laugh; "but if you will be at the pains to come hither about the hour of noon, I will make shift to give you welcome, and to hear what you have to say. For it would seem as if you and I were in some way linked together and destined to be friends."

She lifted her lips to him as she spoke, and they exchanged a clean kiss as if they were once again the girl and boy who had gambolled in the gaunt old garret of long ago instead of the flaunting light o' love and wine-stained rascal that they stood for. And thereafter François said her farewell, and rattled down the stairs and into the thronging street, his head humming with strange thoughts.

CHAPTER XXV

A DISCOVERY

GUILLAUME VILLON, Canon of St. Benoît, had carried himself with some difficulty, for advance of years brought increase of flesh with decrease of breath, up the many stairs to the garret of Mother Villon, hard by the church of the Celestins. Here the good woman, obstinate in her self-respect, had persisted in abiding, as she persisted in supporting herself by her own industry. François was supposed, indeed, by his uncle to contribute to her maintenance out of the pocket-money which his uncle's generosity afforded, but this supposition seldom crystallized into fact. This was never made matter of reproach to François by his mother. She knew that such money as he could handle was of necessity Guillaume Villon's money, and she cherished an obdurate objection to accepting for herself any bounty from such a fountain of benevolence, however honest and charitable the source. Indeed, it would have surprised François not a little if he knew of the silver coins that lay in a little leather bag under her mattress, and that represented the offerings, too few in number, which he had made at the shrine of filial affection. Not that Villon did not mean well where his mother was concerned; but as she never complained, he took it for granted that she had nothing to complain of, and such coins as he commanded were insufficient for his pleasures and woefully insufficient for his desires.

When the wheezing Canon entered Mother Villon's attic, he seated himself heavily on the chair which she dusted and placed for him, and turning an angry and indignant face towards her, wagged his head ominously. The woman,

surprised by the visit and distressed by the visitor's conduct, asked anxiously if anything was amiss. The Canon sighed heavily.

"Much is amiss," he responded, "very much is amiss."

Mother Villon's anxiety for her son was confirmed and intensified by the Canon's words.

"François," she cried eagerly, clasping her thin hands tightly; "is he ill?"

The gloom on the Canon's countenance increased as he answered her.

"If I were to tell you that he is very ill indeed"—Mother Villon gave a groan—"I should be conveying, maybe, a false impression, for the youth is in what might be called excellent bodily health." Mother Villon gave a gasp of relief. "But he is spiritually as sick as a man can be. His face is—or should be—black with his infamies. In a word, he is a knave, a reprobate, a rascal, one that is walking hot-foot to the gallows. He has made a pretty fool of me, I promise you. Much may be excused to the light-heartedness of youth, but the conduct of your son—for I feel that I can no longer regard him as my nephew—is beyond all excuse."

Mother Villon whiffled piteously.

The Canon knew that he was justified in his choler, but felt that he must justify it to his kinswoman by marriage.

"A pretty state of affairs," he said, with a forced bitterness that suited neither the natural mollitude of his voice nor the habitual tranquillity of his features. "A pretty state of affairs. Here is a young fellow that is my relative by blood and that has dwelt under my roof these many years, and yet can make no more of these twain and great advantages than to gain a name as a drunkard and a drabber—aye, and as worse than both." The anger in the old man's voice, the anger in the old man's eyes was so unfeigned by this time that it thrilled Mother Villon with fear. She looked up at her companion in timid interrogation.

"What do you mean, brother?" she faltered, and showed by her use of the epithet of kindred how anxious she was

to placate her brother-in-law. For the stubborn heart of the stubborn old woman had never forgotten the bitter slight that the Villon family had put upon her just because she was comely enough to allure one of their clan, and honest enough to make him marry her.

The Canon did not notice the subtlety of the address. He did but hear a plain question to answer it plainly. "If all that I hear is true," he said, as gruffly as nature permitted, "and I devoutly hope that all I hear is not true, the case is very bad; though if even a little of what I hear be true, the case is bad enough."

The Canon paused cryptically, and Mother Villon wrung her hands at his suspense.

"What do you hear?" she entreated, and again she brothered him and hated herself for doing so in the act.

Firstly the Canon shrugged his shoulders; secondly, he shuddered; thirdly, he crossed himself. Mother Villon beheld these manifestations of emotion with alarm.

"What do I hear?" he echoed. "What do I not hear? The young man was heedless in his studies; well and good. Youth must be young, I suppose, though for my own part I never had any inclination to idleness. The young man dallies with bad company. Well and good again. A man must know the world he lives in, and it takes all sorts to make that same world. God knows I am tolerant; may God forgive my tolerance—but there is an end to my toleration, and I have come to the end and passed over it." As he spoke the Canon knitted his brow and set his lips tightly and shook his head emphatically. These physical portents perturbed Dame Villon prodigiously, and she wrung her hands anew.

"I have reason to believe," the Canon continued sadly, "that our little François"—he was still, in spite of time and change, "our little François" to the Canon in speech, however much the Canon might harden or try to harden his heart—"has gone to the very devil."

Mother Villon crossed herself quickly in mute protest against the strength, not to say profanity, of the Canon's language.

"What do you mean, brother?" she quavered. "What do you mean? I see the boy once a week—almost—and I always find him a civil, dutiful and considerate son."

"A certain man," commented the Canon grimly, "went to Jerusalem and fell among thieves."

Mother Villon threw up her hands with a gesture of despair. "Has my poor boy been plundered?" she cried.

In spite of himself and in spite of his indignation, the Canon could not help smiling, if a little sourly, at Mother Villon's words.

"It was not my intention," he answered slowly, "to suggest that François had himself fallen a victim to thieves. I wished rather to suggest to you that he kept company with thieves, that he was the friend of plunderers if not himself a plunderer."

Mother Villon uttered a wail of surprise and rage.

"Do you mean to call my son a thief?" she screamed, when her anger and astonishment allowed her to find coherent utterance.

Her indignation had no great effect upon the Canon. He only nodded a possible affirmative. Mother Villon quarrelled anew.

"I am sure my boy is honest," she protested. "It is the hard heart you have in your body to harbour such a thought of him."

"Woman," said the Canon, with as much sternness of voice and demeanour as he could command—and it was not very much when all was said and done—"you do me grievous wrong, and show a most intemperate spirit—though much allowance must indeed be made for a natural if misguided maternal affection—when you charge me with having a hard heart. It is because my heart is soft that I have suffered myself to be so grossly deceived, so shamefully abused, so scandalously hoodwinked. But now the veil has been withdrawn, the mist dissipated, the cheat exposed. In a word, I know all."

He said the last word of his prolonged and impressive sentence with so full and furious a voice that Mother Villon

shivered in her seat, though a full and furious voice seemed a most anomalous issue from so bland and affable a body. "All," she repeated in a tremulous whisper, pregnant with alarms.

"All," the Canon repeated emphatically. "Of course, I am neither so deaf nor so purblind that I have had no hint by eye-score and ear-score of some of my nephew's delinquencies. Youth must be young, as I have said, and I can remember drinking a glass and kissing a lass myself. So long as the lad kept good friends always, he might keep bad company occasionally. But now the fool has lost his good friends. He has sunk so low that Messire d'Estouteville, his most profitable patron, tells me that he has forbidden him his house."

At this moment the conversation between the Canon and Mother Villon was violently interrupted by a noisy clattering of feet leading to the attic. Then the door was opened vehemently, and to the astonishment of man and woman, the subject of their conversation plunged headlong into the room. François, thus interrupting, did not notice, or did not heed, the grave looks of his seniors.

"Hulloa, Unc," he said cheerily, by way of greeting to the good Canon, who made no reply, but drew himself together on his chair with a look of offended dignity and indignant virtue, which reminded François, recalling the incident later, of nothing so much as of an overfed pigeon. Then he turned to his mother, oblivious of, or ignoring, her chastened air of staid despair, an air, indeed, which she found it hard to maintain in the very presence of her adored offspring.

"Mother," he cried, "a word with you. Do you remember the little girl whom that Burgundian bully fathered, years ago, when I was no bigger than a spring chicken? Little Huguette, you know, little Huguette."

Mother Villon nodded. She did not know what to say, for she was sadly disturbed by this irruption of alien matter into the grave consideration of the wrongdoings of François. Not knowing what to say, she was sensible enough to hold her peace.

It is likely that, if she had attempted to speak, François would have brushed her words obstreperously off one side like so many unnecessary crumbs, for he was very sure that she remembered little Huguette, and he was hot to make the next move in the game. He took no further notice of the Canon, whom he had for the moment forgotten, and the Canon sat very still and glowered as much as an amiable cleric could glower.

"Mother," François went on, breathless, "am I not in the right in believing that there was some parchment or other, which you found on Huguette, and which you put on one side at the time and have kept ever since?"

By this time Mother Villon's brisk femininity had scented a mystery of some kind, but at least alive and insistent, judging by her son's carriage, and she forgot all about her brother-in-law and her brother-in-law's charges in the new interest that was so suddenly presented to her.

"Very surely there was such a parchment," she cried in a voice that lit its excitement from the flame of François "I kept it from the Burgundian, I scarce know why, except that I thought him not to be trusted with anything, and I have kept it by me ever since—so long, indeed, that I had almost forgotten it."

Even while she was speaking she had scurried across the little room, and now she dived into an ancient wooden chest, in which she kept the major part of her poor belongings. She fumbled for a while among its miscellaneous contents, while François twitched with impatience, and the Canon fumed a little and frowned a little to find that he was taken no notice of, and that his errand was, for the time being at least, set on one side. With a cluck of satisfaction, Mother Villon suddenly fished out of the box a small silk bag, from which, when unfolded, she produced an ancient, stained, disreputable-looking bit of paper, that had been so doubled and redoubled that it seemed now to be scarcely bigger than a walnut.

Mother Villon was proceeding slowly and methodically to open out the folded paper, but her progress was too jog-trot for the anxiety and curiosity of her son. With a

hurried "By your leave, mother," he nimbly picked the thing out of her fingers, and in a jiffy was standing by the window, holding the paper fully expanded in his hands and scrutinizing its surface carefully, with the aid of such light as the small and somewhat dingy window afforded. It was the first time that François had ever clapped eyes on the document, and the sight of it gave him a thrill of surprise.

On the paper a shield was presented, much of the size that is given to such shields in books of blazonry. It was neatly drawn and cunningly coloured, and François, who had picked up not a little of the science of armorials during the time when he served Messire Robert d'Estouteville, could have read it accurately enough, even if its figures and charges had been wholly unfamiliar to him. But the shield and its bearings were not unfamiliar to him. On the contrary, they were very familiar indeed.

The shield bore on a field of ermine three five-branched leaves of gold. Every true Parisian knew these three golden cinquefoils on ermine to be the arms of the former Provost of Paris, Messire Ambroise de Loré. Whether the ex-Provost had a true right to boast any such arms was another matter. Certainly nobody was likely to question Messire Ambroise's right in Messire Ambroise's presence, for the ex-Provost, albeit a great lover of ladies, was of a somewhat touchy and choleric humour as far as his own dignity was concerned, and defended the latter, and justified the former, with the strength of a very strong arm indeed. Wherefore Messire Ambroise de Loré was left to flaunt his golden cinquefoils on their ermine background unchallenged.

If the painted shield interested François hotly, he was even yet more interested by a little line of writing that ran beneath it. This was in a sprawling, almost childish hand, as of one little used to pen-work, who yet managed to carry a sense of a strong personality into the staggering lines and loops. The spelling was as erratic as the penmanship, but to a clerk of the standing of François the legend was easy enough to decipher. It ran thus:

"AMBROISE IS LORD OF THE HEART OF HUGUETTE."

Underneath the same scribe had written in a smaller script:

"And so says Huguette, her mark;"

and this affirmation was followed by a weakly-traced cross with very unequal limbs, which evidently stood for the signature or sign-manual of the said Huguette. François, always easily moved by the obvious pathos of existence, found for a moment his heart in his mouth and the salt in his eyes as he read those two simple lines. But the emotion of pity yielded swiftly to the emotion of delight in his discovery. Here surely was something that might prove of great service to his old playfellow, new-found. He was beginning to understand now, pretty clearly, why that vague, deceptive resemblance existed between the great lady and the mountebank.

Swiftly François swung on his heel, in eagerness to leave the room.

"Mother," he cried, in a voice thrilling with excitement, "I have great need of this paper for a while. Have I your leave to take it?"

The rascal knew very well that it was ask and have for him in any dealings between himself and his mother, but it may be that he helped to salve a somewhat queasy conscience by airing a dutiful submission.

Mother Villon was then, as always, glad to do anything her son desired.

"Surely," she answered, "surely. But what is this paper to you that you are so eager for its possession?"

"It is nothing to me, good mother," François answered, "but I think it may prove much to another. For our little Huguette has turned up again. She is in Paris at this hour and a grown woman, and I think this same paper may serve her well."

Dame Villon clasped and unclasped her thin hands nervously.

"Little Huguette in Paris!" she cried. "Little Huguette

grown up! Dear Saints, how glad I shall be to look upon her face again!"

François, suddenly remembering the character of Huguette's life, felt some vivid misgivings as to the pleasure which such a meeting would really afford to his mother.

"That is as it shall be," he said evasively. "But now I must needs take my leave."

He swayed towards the door, only to find himself confronted by the indignant figure of the Canon, who had risen from his chair to block his egress.

"François," he said solemnly, "you must not be suffered to quit this humble roof, which you profane by your unworthy presence, until I have addressed unto you some salutary exhortations and sharp remonstrances concerning the error of your ways. News has come to me, very thunder to my stunned ears, that you are banned by the respectable, shunned by the reputable; that to be brief"—François groaned inwardly, for brevity was never a quality of the good Canon's eloquence—"the prodigal son was a pattern of well-behaved manhood compared to you."

"Dear Uncle," said François, with a great air of gravity, "I can, or at least I could if I had the leisure which at this juncture I lack, assure you that I am indeed the victim of untoward circumstances. But time presses; duty calls; and with all respect I crave your permission to depart."

As he spoke, and before Canon Guillaume could reply, François had ducked deftly under his uplifted arm, and, laying a hand upon the latch, had opened the door sufficiently to permit his lean body to slip through. In another moment his flying footsteps were heard clattering down the stairs as noisily as they had clattered up so short a time before.

CHAPTER XXVI

AN EX-PROVOST

MESSIRE AMBROISE DE LORÉ was a man in a not uncommon class of mankind, whose portrait would be painted in very different colours by those that liked him and those that did not like him. Perhaps he was a little uncommon in his class in the very vehemence of the difference between the two presentations. Messire Ambroise had often enough caught sight of a reflection of his countenance on the rounded surface of a metal flagon and on the scooped-out surface of a metal dish. He was aware, without paying much heed to the matter, that in the first case his features were distorted almost out of all recognition in one direction, and in the second case were so distorted in another. Messire Ambroise may or may not have been aware of the fact that there was not more difference between these two grotesques than there was between the picture of him that was limned by his friends, and the picture that was limned by his enemies. As in the case of the metallic reflections, Messire Ambroise would have paid little heed to the differentiation. What concerned him was the real Ambroise de Loré, with whom he was, or believed himself to be, familiar, and whom he liked quite well enough for contentment.

The ex-Provost of Paris would have been termed a biggish man by those that did not set their standard by the inches of his son-in-law. Perhaps he did not seem as tall as he was because of his sturdy bulk, composed of no foolish fat, but solidly bastioned with hard brawn. He was a man of great physical strength. If—inconceivable supposition—he were ever to come to grips with Messire Robert d'Estouteville, he would not have had a ghost of a chance,

though he would certainly have put up a good fight for it. But then it is likely that there was not such another man in all France as Messire Robert. Also, Messire Ambroise was a man of great endurance, for he had tested his strength and vitality incessantly ever since he had become conscious of their possession; had demanded and received their fullest allegiance and obedience; and was now in his late middle age as strong and as jocund as when he began the business of hard living. Everything he did, and he did everything that according to his view it became a soldier to do, he did with a headlong zest and unquenchable appetite, which made him the envy of men no less keen but infinitely less vigorous. Whether in fighting, or in the politer businesses of drinking, eating and making love—not that politeness was characteristic of him—the man was no less than a prodigy.

A man of such a composition, it is easy to see, might be interpreted very differently by Hob and Nob. The qualities which, to Hob's mind, might earn Messire Ambroise the title of a right good fellow and fine figure of a fighting man of the bluff old boarhound breed, might, according to Nob, stamp him as a truculent ruffian, as mannerless, as savage and as dangerous as a wild-boar. Where both the critics, being human, erred, let it be conceded that the angle of error was greater with Nob. It is true that the fastidious, the dainty or the austere would never find their account in the companionship of the ex-Provost, but the more generous, the more merry, or the more easy-going would be likely to learn that if Ambroise de Loré had his full share of the rough-and-tumble vices of his kind of fighting man, he was far from being wanting in the kindred virtues. Any man that heartily liked good liquor and brisk minxes had in him the elements for a friendship with Messire Ambroise, but they had to be topped with some qualities of honesty, loyalty and honour, or they would not carry the friendship far. Messire Ambroise's ideas of temperance and continence were as lax as an unstrung bow, but his fidelity to king and cause was as dogged as his infidelity to women.

Messire Ambroise was sitting alone in his cabinet, occupied with a flask of Burgundy and his reflections. The wine was brilliant, the meditations were of a less lively complexion. Though it was now many a long day since he had, as it were, delivered the keys of the Provostship of Paris into the hands of his son-in-law, he had never contrived wholly to become accustomed to the change in his life. He had grumbled at the burden of the work while he bore it, after the honourable official custom, but when it no longer rested on his shoulders, he felt as unemployed as Atlas on a memorable occasion. He was still, indeed, possessed of much, if not all, that a man of his kidney could desire; the command of wealth, the health of a bull, the company of an amiable and patient wife—to whom, indeed, he owed no little of his fortune—and a still lively interest in irregular and incessant attachments. But he missed at the beginning, and still missed, more than he had expected, the kind of dignity and glitter that goes with the holding of important office. Messire Ambroise de Loré, as Provost of Paris, bulked largely in the view of all Paris. Messire Ambroise de Loré sundered from his Provostship merely added his item to the number of wealthy gentlefolk resident in Paris.

A special circumstance had served on this particular day to rekindle Messire Ambroise's regrets for his old days of dominion. A certain great Italian nobleman was on a visit to Paris, attended by a princely retinue. Apparently engaged in travelling solely for his own pleasure, this nobleman was acting in reality—or was believed so to act—as an unacknowledged but secretly accredited envoy from the Duke of Milan. On this very day the Italian and his band were being sumptuously entertained to a banquet in the Provost's Palace given in their honour by Robert d'Estouteville. The fact had reminded Messire Ambroise, more forcibly than he liked, that he no longer sat on the dais of authority and offered civic hospitality to distinguished strangers. He could have been at this banquet if he chose; he and milady his wife had, as a matter of course, been bidden to it by their dutiful son-in-law. But Messire Am-

broise, though he laughed at himself, and declared that he was growing as fretful as an old hen, felt reluctant to play the guest on such an occasion where he had been used to play the host. So, on an unbelievable plea of indisposition, he sent his wife to the feast by herself and sulked at home in company with the best wine of his cellar.

Messire Ambroise, plying the bottle, had drunk himself into that sullen humour which longs like a volatile Athenian for some new thing, but which also fears that nothing fresh may offer itself to the sum of old impressions. He was aroused from this twilight, that was truly more physical than spiritual, by the entrance of a serving-man, who informed him that Master François Villon craved permission to wait upon his honour on certain business of importance.

Messire Ambroise de Loré sat up in his seat and stared. He knew the name well enough and the young man who carried it. He was aware of the ill-repute into which he had fallen, of the ban which had been placed upon him by Robert d'Estouteville, of the sorry company which he chose to keep. But the knowledge in nothing troubled Messire Ambroise. Being no longer Provost, he felt that he need not seem too nicely punctilious—not that punctiliousness had ever been one of his foibles—and he even was tempted to believe that his son-in-law had been somewhat extreme in forbidding his house to so amusing a rascal. For himself, if only Villon would succeed in amusing him, he was cheerfully ready to condone, for the time being, his rascality. It was therefore with a brighter mien and a lighter liver that he bade admit Master François Villon to his presence.

Master François, duly ushered in, saluted Messire Ambroise with the respect due to his standing, but with, at the same time, a lurking joviality on his lips that implied a very lucid comprehension of his nature. The ex-Provost reached for a beaker, filled it with Burgundy, and presented it to Villon, who, accepting it gratefully, lifted it to his host's health and shifted the contents with equal rapidity and satisfaction. Messire Ambroise eyed him with approval.

"Well, young reprobate," he began, drolling, "what do you want with me? I hear fine tales of your behaviour. Do you come to woo my favour with my virtuous son-in-law?"

François shook his head.

"I come with no such purpose, my lord. It has pleased Messire Robert to deny me his house for what he believes to be good and sufficient reasons, and until he may choose to raise his interdict of his own free will, I shall make no effort to melt his heart with the warmth of other men's breath."

Messire Ambroise rolled in his chair in a mood of unexpected enjoyment.

"Lord!" he protested, "to hear you talk is as fine as listening to an archbishop preaching. But what then is your errand?"

"My lord," answered François, "I believe I hold some property of yours which it is as much my duty to restore as I hope it may prove your pleasure to receive."

Messire Ambroise widened his eyes and pricked his ears.

"Goods of mine?" he questioned, wondering. "I cannot call to my mind that I have lost anything of late."

"That which I would offer, my lord," François replied, "you lost, if it be yours, not of late, but many a long year ago."

"You are damnably enigmatic," the ex-Provost averred in ever-growing astonishment. "Show me what you hold, in the devil's name, and let me judge for myself whether it be mine or no."

François respectfully dropped on one knee, and drawing from the bosom of his jerkin a little bag of faded silk, tendered it respectfully to his host. Messire Ambroise, taking it from him, dandled it on his own palm and gaped at it.

"Here is a pretty thing to make a fuss about," he grunted. "I do not think I ever saw it before, and it weighs too light to carry any great matter."

"That," said François quietly, as he rose, "is for your lordship to decide when you have examined the contents."

Messire Ambroise doing as he was advised, which was indeed the wisest thing to do on the occasion, dipped a finger and thumb into the bag and picked out a piece of folded paper. "What have we here?" he asked thoughtfully. He tossed the bag on to the table and began to unfold the paper somewhat clumsily and with no great pretence at interest.

But when he had got the paper opened out and saw its simple freight, his bearing changed with a most marvellous transformation. His face was ever of a mellow ruddiness, but it now flushed with so hot a crimson that François was positively startled to behold it. He shut his eyes tightly for a few moments, as if the sight of what the paper showed had dazzled him, and his whole massive body heaved and shook from the shock of violent emotion. François, suddenly concerned lest the stout knight were about to have a fit, had some thoughts of sprinkling him with a libation of Burgundy to cool this sudden heat; but even as he reached out his hand towards the flagon Messire Ambroise seemed to come to himself and to recover the self-possession which had been so rudely shaken. He opened his eyes and fixed them in a stern and almost menacing inquiry upon François, while the over-flood of colour slowly ebbed from his cheeks.

"How in God's name," he cried, in a voice that was hoarse and thick with many mingled passions, "did this paper come into your hands?"

"My lord," François answered, "it has been in my mother's keeping these many years, and I myself never saw it until this morning. But having seen it, and recognizing your blazon, I resolved to bring it to you, partly because I thought you might like to have it, and partly for another reason."

Messire Ambroise, while François spoke, watched him steadily with eyes that had been likened to those of the wild-boar, and that in their fierce and fiery regard seemed well to merit the suggestion.

"How did your mother come to have this in her keep-

ing?" he asked. "And why did she hold it back from me, if she knew that it concerned me?"

The ex-Provost knew all about Mother Villon, partly because he was on terms of friendship, affably accorded, with Canon Guillaume, and partly because it was a provost's business to know as much as he could about any resident of Paris city.

"My lord," Villon replied, "my mother had not and has not any idea that this paper has any connection with your lordship. The poor soul can neither read nor write, and she knows as much of heralds' work as, saving your presence, a mouse knows of miracles."

Messire Ambroise nodded his big head in agreement. He was no great clerk himself, and he would, after all, have been surprised if he had learned that Mother Villon could read hand of write.

"So much for that matter," he said slowly; "but now for the other. How did this paper come into her possession?"

"My lord," said François, "I am well acquainted with all the circumstances, but they make, with the best will in the world for brevity, something of a long story. Have I your lordship's permission to tell it?"

"Tell," said Ambroise briefly, and as he spoke he signified by a wave of his hand to François, who had been standing all this while, that he should sit down. François obeyed, and crossing one leg over the other, and folding his hands across the uptilted knee, began to tell his tale.

He told of his childhood's memory, of the drunken Burgundian ruffian, of his fight with the leaguer of wolves, of the girl-child that he bore in his arms. At this point in the narrative Messire Ambroise frowned, and made as if he would speak. But he did not speak, and François, who had paused to wait upon his pleasure, resumed his theme.

He told how Mother Villon fostered the girl after she had heard the Burgundian's story of how he had found it, and how she named it after a name that was worked upon

its garment and which one of her gossips deciphered for her. He told how the child and he were playmates for what seemed to his childish mind quite a long time and a pleasant time. And then he told how the Burgundian soldier came back after an absence, and announced his intention of taking the child away, and how, as Mother Villon had no power though every wish to prevent him, he did take the child away, and they saw her no more. And here François, quite alive to the interest of the story he was telling, was artful enough to pause, as if the story had come to an end and there were no more of it.

Messire Ambroise gave vent to a sound that may have been intended for a sigh or for a groan, but that bore in its volume a greater likeness to a roar.

"Did you never," he asked, with curious quality of anxiety in his rough voice, "have any tidings of what became of this girl?"

Here François felt that he was ready, like a skilful craftsman, to spring his big surprise.

"My lord," he said, with the quiet of a high satisfaction in his voice, "I said but a little while ago that I came here this day, partly to present you with this paper and partly for another reason."

"You did," said Messire Ambroise sharply. "Well, what was that other reason?"

"That other reason," said François, rising from his seat to give greater effect to his announcement, "is to tell your lordship that the girl Huguette is at this hour within the walls of Paris."

Messire Ambroise also rose to his feet and steadied himself against the table. It was evident to François that the effect of the emotion which he had displayed at the sight of the paper was still strong upon him.

"If this be true," he said heavily, "you may very well guess that it concerns me nearly."

"It is indeed true, my lord," François assured him earnestly. "I could not mistake my little playmate. But with your lordship's good leave, I will tell you how I encountered her again."

Thereupon he related the events that befell at Montfaucon that morning, and told of Huguette's bearing towards the condemned Burgundian, and of where she lived and how. Messire Ambroise listened with a growing interest and a mounting good-humour.

"It looks to me," he said, "as if I had found a kinswoman when I least expected it."

"I am very much of your mind, my lord," François agreed, greatly pleased with the way the business was going.

"But I must see the girl for myself before I can come to any decision in the matter," the ex-Provost asserted.

"Even what I was about to make so bold as to suggest," François approved. "The girl has promised to receive me to-morrow at the hour of noon, and it occurred to me that if your lordship were pleased to pay a visit to her at that time, without disclosing your identity, you might be enabled to form a judgment at your ease."

"That is a good idea," said Ambroise, "and one that I will act upon. But be very sure, my young friend, that you give no hint of my purpose before I present myself, nor of my person when I do."

"You may be sure of my discretion, my lord," François asserted emphatically, and did not quail before the somewhat quizzical smile with which Messire Ambroise received such an assurance from the lips of one who was not exactly famous for his discretion.

When François had taken his leave, Messire Ambroise set musing heavily over his wine. If either his dearest friend or his sourest enemy had taken him unawares in that hour, he would scarcely have recognized him for the familiar man, so altered was his grizzled visage from its expected jollity or dourness. The ex-Provost was musing on a story of his past, a pitiful little story, of a kind with which the lives of such fighting men as he were studded. Messire Ambroise had long ago lost count of his intrigues, amours and diversions; his memory was clogged with a blur of pretty faces to which he could seldom or never set a name. But it so happened that there was one face that

did show more clearly than the others, and this face had a name to it, and the name was Huguette. It had happened in the dark time after the death of the Maid and just before the Duke of Burgundy came in as ally to the French King and helped to break the English power in France. She was a novice in a convent in a provincial town, of gentle blood and poor fortune. Messire Ambroise recalled now, with a queer, unfamiliar pang of regret, how he first saw her, liked her, found a way to woo and win her. He had given her that paper, with his painted arms, now so oddly come back to him, as a jesting proof of his command of her. He rode away, as he had often ridden away before. But because he had liked the girl, and because he had not the power even if he had had the inclination to marry her, being as he was already legally married to a dame of rank and fortune, whom he respected for both these qualities with a respect that did not hinder him from frequent infidelities, he acted, as he thought, very well by her. He took her from her convent, gave her a large sum of money, and settled her in the care of some honest folk in the country. After this he more or less forgot all about her. But some four years or so later, when King Charles was comfortably back in Paris, and Messire Ambroise was responsible for the good order of the city, something happened which for all his roughness and toughness he never forgot. On the snowy morning of a snowy night a company of the Watch seeking to pick their way through a thick mound of snow found that it was not merely a mound of snow, but also a grave. They bore the body of a woman to the dead-house, and as they had found it not far from Messire Ambroise's dwelling, Messire Ambroise was informed of the matter and came to view the body, and looked on the face of Huguette.

Messire Ambroise had got thus far in his musings when they were dissipated by the entrance of his wife, who insisted on telling him of all that had happened at the banquet of Messire Robert's, and the ex-Provost, seeming to listen attentively, professed to be vastly interested in the good lady's narrative.

CHAPTER XXVII

A FRIEND OF PRINCES

THE fair May afternoon was slowly waning as François quitted the house of the ex-Provost. The streets were fairly full of people, a civic condition which pleased Villon, who never needed solitude for his reflections, but found rather that his wits were the nimbler for the jostling of his body in a crowd. He quickly noticed that the greater volume of those who were taking the warm air seemed to be making in one direction. Impelled by that town-bred spirit of curiosity to see whatever may be going on, and guessing that the trend of the throng imported some spectacle, François yielded himself to the suction of the current, and contentedly followed his fellow-citizens wherever they might choose to lead him. He had no business of his own to attend to; he had done all that was to be done to further Huguette's interests; he was as free as a truant schoolboy to drift where he listed and gape where he pleased. Indeed, he was always at his happiest in those days in surrendering his stained senses to the mood of the truant schoolboy and persuading or half-persuading himself that he still stood only a-tiptoe on the threshold of the world of men.

Carried by the will of the concourse as an idly floating swimmer suffers himself to be carried by the will of the stream, François found himself presently brought to a halt by the cessation of movement in the mob. It had come to a stop at a place where two ways met, because, for one thing, it could not well proceed any further on account of the multitude already assembled on the spot, and, for another thing, because that place seemed to have been from the beginning the goal of its intent.

François, questioning a neighbour in the press as to the reason for this affluence of humanity, was answered that the folk had gathered together to witness the passage through the streets of a certain prince of Italy and his retinue. The said prince, with the said retinue, had, it seemed, passed through those streets earlier in the day on their way to a banquet at the house of the Provost, Messire Robert d'Estouteville, and the glitter of their garments and the magnificence of their array had so flattered the gaze and fluttered the spirits of the sight-seeing Parisians that they were assembled now in the desire and hope of witnessing the gaudy and pompous cavalcade make its return journey.

Even as the gossip told his news there came a motion to the crowd and a murmur from the crowd, which made it very plain to François that the anticipated pleasure was about to be realized. His own readiness to share in that pleasure had been something dashed by the mention of Messire Robert's name, reviving, as it did, Villon's sense of injury at his banishment. It was, therefore, with a very real indifference that François beheld the splendid procession come into sight and make its way slowly along the lane of applauding beholders. Yet in itself the spectacle was brilliant enough to merit attention.

In the first place marched a number of Royal Archers, clearing a way for the foreign lord and his friends. After these came a little company of the Italian nobleman's musicians. They all carried their master's coat-of-arms on breast and back, and they all trumpeted so merrily that it was good to hear. Then came certain of the lord's own armed body-guard, also on foot, and apparelled as gaily as the musicians. These were succeeded by a number of gentlemen on horseback, friends and followers, who had accompanied the nobleman from Italy. Thereafter followed the nobleman himself in his great gilded carriage, which creaked and jolted and rattled over the ill-paved Parisian streets, so that the great man, sitting within, found it hard to preserve that happy blend of dignity and grace for which his country was celebrated as he politely re-

turned the salutations of the crowd with dignified inclinings of the head.

After the great man's coach came another little band of riders, still more gorgeous than the first, who seemed to take a special pleasure in showing off their mastery of their steeds, by making them curvet and caracole in the most surprising manner to the slightest suggestion of wrist or spur. Beyond these again, and bringing up the rear of the cortège, rode the servants of the gentlemen in attendance on the distinguished visitor. The Parisian crowd was delighted with the display and clapped its hands and shouted itself hoarse in approval.

After the carriage had passed the point where François stood the procession came to a halt for a little while, owing to the difficulty which the Provost's archers, who formed the escort, had to keep the way open through so dense a mass of spectators. François, who had managed at the beginning to insinuate himself into the front rank of the multitude, was carelessly and inattentively surveying the group of horsemen who had ranged up behind the gilded carriage, when all of a sudden he was aware of something that made him both careful and attentive. For his roving glance over the gay company met the fixed gaze of one of its number who was looking very steadily and earnestly in his direction, and François thrilled with the knowledge that he was looking into the face of Philippe Sermois.

Though François knew the man at once, he told himself in the very breath of recognition that he might well be excused if he had not known him. For, indeed, Philippe Sermois had greatly changed. It was not merely that he was habited now like a man of rank and wealth; that he rode with an air on a noble jennet; that his hands shone with rings above the finger-stalls of his gloves, or that he bore himself with ease and address in the fellowship of a great man's court. These things made for distinction, not for alteration; the change was greater than any mere assumption of gold or velvet. The vast cheese-like face, whose livid vacuity had so appalled François at Saumur, still seemed to be of monstrous size; but Italian suns and

Italian vintages had transmuted its green-and-white pallor into a colour almost as dully purple as the lees of wine, and the once so smooth surface was folded and furrowed with lines and creases that were so many ciphers of gratified sensuality. If François had found him hideous before, when his head resembled a huge turnip, he found him no less hideous now, when it suggested rather the same turnip masquerading as a beet. But for some reason or other, on the instant unexplained, he did not find it so horrible, if fully as hateful.

François knew very well that just as he had recognized Sermois, so Sermois had recognized him. While he was wondering if any overt act would follow the recognition his wonder was answered. The impediment to the progress of the company had been removed; the great man's carriage had rolled and grumbled onwards; the attending cavaliers were rising and falling in their stirrups in pursuit. But Philippe Sermois, deftly detaching himself from his companions, turned his horse towards the spot where François stood and drew rein directly in front of him. Those that were in Villon's immediate vicinity gaped and grinned to see him accosted by so great a personage.

"I want a word with you," Sermois said curtly. His voice was, if not richer, at least thicker than of yore, the voice of one that has indulged in good meats and wine for a well-fed term of years. But it had a note of command in it that seemed habitual.

Villon, to his surprise and satisfaction, found himself more amused than either alarmed or angered by this reappearance of Sermois. The years that had passed since they parted had been formative years for François, years of schooling. The school may have been a damnably bad one, and the formation it accomplished a lamentable piece of work; but at least it conferred upon its victim a certain weather-wisdom in the world's affairs, a certain stiffening of the mental backbone, and, above all, a certain quality of critical depreciation which very much minimized an alien power to impress.

"You shall have as many as twenty," François answered,

with an air of cheerful impudence which Sermois did not seem to notice, though his expressionless eyes were fixed upon Villon's face. By this time the group of cavaliers had passed on, and were succeeded by the mounted servants. Sermois signalled to one of these, who checked his pace and joined him. Sermois dismounted somewhat heavily and, putting his reins into the servant's hands, bade him lead the animal home. As the servant obeyed, Sermois turned again to Villon, who was by now the object of much envy and jealousy among his neighbours of the mob.

"Do you know of a decent tavern," he inquired in a pompous voice, that was raised for the benefit of those around, "where a gentleman can take his ease in peace and can taste some liquor not too unworthy of a sensitive gullet?"

By this time the great man's procession had passed out of sight, and only the helmets of the archers were visible above the heads of the fluctuant dissolving crowd. Philippe and François were facing one another in a widening space of elbow-room.

"The 'Unicorn' is hard by," said Villon cheerfully. "They have good wine at the 'Unicorn.'"

"Then lead the way to the 'Unicorn,'" said Sermois, still with the note of command in his tone. "I only hope that you speak the truth, for I have drunk so much good liquor this afternoon that I would not sour my stomach with crudity."

François was inwardly vastly entertained by the swaggering carriage and language of the man, yet it irritated him too not a little, for he guessed very well that it was intended to air the speaker's contempt for his companion. But he betrayed neither mirth nor anger as he answered.

"There is no better wine to be had in all Paris than at the 'Unicorn,'" he declared; then he added, as if by way of afterthought, "for those who can afford to pay for it."

"Of whose number I'll warrant you are not," said Sermois quickly; "but you need have no fear for the depth

nor the width of my purse, little man, so guide me thither as nimbly as may be."

François, paying no heed to the offensive patronage of Sermois' speech, observed that the "Unicorn" was little more than round the corner, and the pair walked thither side by side in silence.

A few moments of this silent movement brought them to the door of the "Unicorn," carried them across the threshold and settled them at a clean table in a comfortable corner. The "Unicorn" was a tavern far above Villon's flight; it was the resort of gentlefolk and burgesses. None of his unsavoury comrades sought harbourage there, and it was scarcely likely that if Villon alone had presented himself at its portal, he would have found much warmth in his welcome. But the company of Sermois covered all Villon's shortcoming as the splendid apparel of Sermois atoned for the dingy garments of the poet. Lolling back in his chair, Philippe Sermois broke the silence by asking François what he would like to drink and begging him to put no limit to his wish in drinking since the Sermois purse was full and the Sermois stomach never relished nor accepted anything drinkable that was less than the best.

But if Villon had consented to accompany Sermois to the "Unicorn" to hear what he had to say, he could not bring himself to consent to taste his hospitality. François was by no means squeamish as to how he came by victual and drink; the tricks he had played upon vintners to quench the thirst and dull the hunger of himself and his fellow never-do-wells were the talk of Paris, and Villon himself had run them into rhyme. Also, he was thirsty at that present, and he carried but a few coins in his pocket which he could ill afford to spare for the slaking of his thirst. But his spirit sickened at the thought of drinking wine at the cost of the obscene fellow who lolled opposite to him, with his red face shining in a brutal pride and his glassy eyes masking derision. So he, too, lounged back in his chair, and he thrust his hands deep in his pocket, put a bold face on it and commanded a bold voice.

"I do not choose to drink with you," he declared, "because I would not ask you to drink with me, and I am not of so solicitous a humour as to accept where I would refuse to bestow. Call for what you want and say what you have to say, and leave me to furnish my own reckoning."

Sermois grinned evilly. More power of expressing evil emotions had grown into his face since he had sojourned in Italy, but this power of expression was not near so frightful to François as the old, awful, barren blankness. So he answered Philippe's grin with an impish leer and began to whistle a lively air.

"You are a merry fellow," Sermois said, "and seem a little less timid and pitiful than when last we parted. Drink what you please and how you please, so long as you sit still and listen to what I have to say, for it is well that folly should learn from wisdom and be chastened by the lesson."

With a lordly wave of the hand he summoned the landlord, who had been standing discreetly hard by waiting upon his visitors' good pleasure. He now advanced to take the commands of Sermois, but before the latter could utter them, Villon cut in with a brisk: "Bring me a measure of Hippocras, tapster, and see that it be wisely blended." He smiled as he spoke, for this same Hippocras was a delicious mixture of hot wine and spices, very heady and cosseting, which François dearly loved but rarely tasted, because it was generally beyond the reach of his pocket. Now, in the face of his enemy, he resolved to carry himself like a prince, though he should in consequence lack breakfast on the morrow, and the aftermorrow.

The landlord nodded his head and turned to Philippe Sermois, who, without taking any apparent notice of Villon's interruption, ordered a flagon of the best Burgundy. When the landlord had departed upon his errand, Sermois, leaning across the table, brought his ensanguined face nearer to François and stared at him steadfastly and silently for the space of several seconds. Fran-

çois would have wilted or desired to wilt before such a stare on that detested face a few years before. Now, toughened in pluck, hardened in impudence, and inured to brutality, he bore the gaze of Sermois as composedly as if it had been the stare of a sheep.

If Sermois resented the composure of his opposite, he showed no sign of resentment, but continued to stare with the same implacable vacancy and to fail to downface François until the landlord returned with a steaming mug of the mulled wine and the flagon of Burgundy. He set them respectfully on the table before his oddly matched guests and withdrew.

François shook himself from his recumbent attitude, reached out a lean, brown hand, clawed hold of the handle of his mug and lifted the steaming, aromatic mixture to his lips. Looking at Sermois over the edge of the vessel, he pronounced this invocation: "May the devil soon come to his own." Then he tilted his wrist and slowly sucked in a long, delicious swig of the spicy, piping wine.

Sermois, ignoring Villon's insolence, filled himself a cup of Burgundy, smelled of it critically, sipped at it cautiously, and then as one who is persuaded that he is in the presence of a fluid he may condescend to swallow, emptied his glass and set it down again with a grunt of satisfaction.

"I did not think," he said approvingly, "that there was such good drinking to be found in Paris outside of a princely house. I have tasted worse in Italy in the dwellings of great men. For you must know that in Italy I am a friend of princes."

François was understood to murmur something to the effect that Italian princes must be hard put to it for companionship, or have a singular lack of particularity in their choice. Sermois heard him very distinctly, but he made as if he had not heard him.

"I wondered," he said, "when I returned to Paris if I would chance to see you. Do not flatter your vanity, my lad, with the notion that I have carried your fool's name

in my head ever since I quitted the city. I forgot your existence before the walls lay a league behind me."

"That," said François politely, "is a bitter thing to hear."

"But when I return," Sermois continued, "I pick you up in my thoughts where I left you, and I reflect upon fortune with gusto. Here am I, I tell myself, a man that has lived a gilded life, that has sated all appetites, that has been the confidential friend of illustrious personages——"

"Why not say pimp, and have done with it?" suggested François, and yawned behind a courteously uplifted palm.

The porphyry-tinted visage, the glutted utterance, showed no change as Sermois continued:

"How, I asked myself, shall I find the frowsy knave, François Villon? Doubtless some beadle at a parish church, or some rusty clerk at a scrivener's desk. I was too kind."

"Amiability was always your weakness," François suggested. Sermois slighted the suggestion.

"I find you," he said, "—for it was destined that I should find you—more degraded and debased and despicable than I could have hoped, though not more than I could have wished."

"Pray, don't say that," François urged gently. "A man can do no better than his best even to gratify those he admires."

Sermois took no notice of his words, but flowed on:

"It was the sight of you long ago, so insignificant, so silly, so insolently tricked out in false finery, the lady's lap-dog, the gentleman's spaniel, which first stirred me to break away from my mean surroundings, to spit the bread of charity from my teeth and make a bite at the cake of life."

"You could manage a tidy morsel, too," François commented, critically surveying a countenance of which the mouth was a conspicuous if not an engaging feature. Sermois supported the scrutiny and the sneer with his habitual

callousness. François, recalling how that studied callousness had broken down once after the fisticuffs at Saumur, asked himself what might prevail to break it down again.

"Well," Sermois resumed composedly, "I made my bite, and tasted it, and chewed it, and savoured it, and swallowed it, and digested it, and have thriven on it; and from a knowledge of my own passions, and the zest I gained from their gratification, I have learned to play on the passions of others. If at first in my inexperience I hoped to succeed through servility, I soon learned my mistake. It is arrogance that will carry a man triumphantly through the world; it is arrogance that has made me always the equal, often the friend, and sometimes the master, of those I choose to serve."

François pushed back his chair with a weary look of strained attention upon his face.

"I am sure it is very kind of you," he asserted, "to take me so deeply into your confidence. Yet I feel that I must not presume upon your good-nature lest it tempt you into indiscretion. If you reveal to me the secret of how you have risen in the world, may I not hope to learn to soar upon the same proud pinions? Let me, therefore, deny myself the privilege of hearing any further pages from your fascinating memoirs."

Sermois sat as unchanged in his obstinate solemnity as if François had not opened his lips.

"Such as I am," he said, "I have a steadfast memory. I forget when to remember is idle. I remember when remembrance is wise. Now that I am back again in Paris, I pick up old abandoned threads. Thus I remember you, whom I think I promised myself the pleasure, one day, of killing. Also I remember a certain fair lady, who still, I am happy to find, continues fair, and whom I think I promised myself, one day, the pleasure of kissing."

He did not exactly say "kissing," but he made his meaning perfectly clear, and François, who had half risen from his seat, dropped back again and scanned his antagonist thoughtfully, while he spun the shuttle of swift meditation.

The menace of Sermois to himself he was prepared, in all cheerfulness, to disregard. Villon knew himself to be a very different customer from the dreamy youth whom Sermois had been pleased to threaten on the bridge in the course of their last meeting. Also, he knew himself to be too down at heel and out at elbows in his luck to be seriously worth the enmity of anyone save a madman. Perhaps Sermois was a madman. His vanity certainly was gigantic enough to suggest insanity. Did that foul bully, that red idol of the flesh, really believe that it was in his power to gain so much as a smile from Ambroise? Could that wine-skin of a countenance ever do other than excite repugnance? Who could be other than repelled by that evil smile, by the bestial thickness of those lips, by those jaws of discoloured teeth, orange-yellow for the most part, though here and there black or bluish-green. François was thus critical of tushes because he himself had neat little teeth, white and sharp as a cat's, which he tended carefully, they being, as he would often whimsically declare, his only beauty.

"Would not my lord of Estouteville have a word to say to that?" he asked after a pause. Sermois snarled in a fashion which was intended to express hilarity, and which served to bring into evidence a reserve of discoloured tusks.

"Bah!" he exclaimed, opening and closing his large, damp hands, as if he cherished some vague hope of drying them by the process of exercise, "trust to one that has been trained in the school of Italian gallantry to bamboozle any blundering oaf of a husband!"

The idea of gallantry as associated with the object in front of him made François uncertain whether he wanted most to laugh or to vomit. But he managed to stifle both impulses in the interest of his curiosity.

"Did not Messire Robert recognize you?" he asked. Philippe shook his head.

"No," he chuckled. "How should he? It is many a good year since we met, and there is little in common between the poor drudge and dependent of Saumur and

the fine gentleman in whose company you are for the moment privileged to sit. Philippe Sermois that was is now the Count Filippo da Sermese, who does as he chooses with women that please him and men that displease him."

He suddenly changed his mood from a repulsive self-complacency to a less repulsive heat.

"I have wasted enough time with you. Take your warning, Master François Villon. Messire Robert d'Estouteville has kicked you out of his household; it will be my part to kick you out of existence. Your bell has knelled."

"I do not hear it jangling," answered François, lolling back in his seat with his thumbs in his girdle. The other leaned across the table.

"You will hear it soon enough. Keep out of my way, if you can, for I have it in my mind that our next meeting will be your undoing."

"Why not let it be this meeting?" cried François, exasperated by the mad vanity of the man. "I can easily borrow a sword, for all that I am only a student, and I know a nice quiet meadow beyond the walls where a difference of opinion may be very pleasantly settled."

Sermois uttered a mirthless roar of laughter.

"Do you think that the Count Filippo da Sermese could condescend to cross swords with a University urchin? Moreover, there is no hurry. I wish you to live until Madame Ambroise has graced me with her favours. When that has happened, and when you know it has happened, and are mad with the knowledge of it, why, then, will it not be kind of me to put you out of your misery?"

He rose as he spoke, and without further word to François paced solemnly with the port of a stage emperor through the tavern tables to the tavern door and so disappeared. François sat where he was, with a troubled mind, tickling his cloven chin thoughtfully.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE UNDERWORLD

FRANÇOIS was inclined to consider Philippe Sermois as little, if at all, less than a madman; but the belief did not in any way diminish his estimation of the man's danger as an enemy. He asked himself, as he had asked himself before, if he should let Sermois know that he, François Villon, knew of the jugglery at Saumur, in the hope to frighten or hamper him with the threat of exposure. As before, he dismissed the idea. Sermois could confidently deny it. The Burgundian was dead; Huguette—if he had wished to bring her into the business, which he did not—never saw Sermois, as her story showed; Messire de Beauvau was far away, and even if he were nigh at hand, might very well fail to recognize the pallid apparition that had misled him in the red and fleshy sensualist with the Italianate name. Moreover, he argued anew that a piece of secret knowledge about an opponent is always a useful possession. Next he asked himself if he ought to warn either Ambroise, or her husband, or her father, of the rascal's brags, and again he thought not. Sermois would have only to deny, and his denials would easily outweigh the unsupported assertion of François. So after much cogitation he decided that he would endeavour to counter the menaces of Sermois with all the cunning at his command.

Master François felt that in pitting himself against Philippe Sermois he was challenging a very unequal combat. On the face of it, Sermois had all the advantage. He had means and, in consequence, influence. He came to Paris under the cloak of a great noble; the doors of great houses were open to him; he was a personage of importance. Fran-

çois, on the other hand, was a person of no importance at all; a runagate student, with a tarnished reputation, a penniless wastrel, whose unbearable conduct had deprived him of all decent friendship, all patronage, all protection. If his uncle's bounty still permitted him to lodge at the Red Gate, his uncle's bounty went no further nowadays, for the justly-offended Canon refused the favour of his countenance to François. This was a deprivation which François could have endured with patience, but the Canon refused also the contents of his purse, a penalization that François found far more exasperating. Messire the Provost, the best friend that François could have had in all Paris after the King—and hardly even after the King—had flung him into the gutter, as it were. Truly, it would seem as if the advantages were all of one side in a battle with Sermois. But François did not suffer himself to be consternated by the odds against him. He would make friends with the Mammon of Unrighteousness; he would find him allies in the Underworld.

There are advantages in belonging to the Underworld which are not always or often shared by those that stalk in loftier spheres, in higher planes of space. A man may think himself and be thought by others a ruler of men, a leader, a director, yet all the while be little better than the puppet whose string is pulled by yonder rascal in the attic whose grimy window overlooks the back garden of the palace. Messire Robert d'Estouteville, for instance, was Provost of Paris, and the city lay under his gauntlet like a pea under a thimble. But there were many things of infinite concern to his authority which Messire Robert would have been glad to know and did not know, which were easily within the ken of Master François Villon, and which were familiar facts of every-day use and knowledge to René de Montigny. That Italianate spadassin could have sold half Paris—the half Paris that gave a population to the Court of Miracles—to those that strove to police the city, and he would have struck a bargain and made the deal if only he had been invulnerable as Achilles or immortal as Tithonus. Being neither, and placing the highest price imaginable

upon his own olive-tinted skin, the prudent René kept the secrets of Half Paris to himself, and Messire the Provost was so much the less well informed.

If Master François was a recognized head of all the roaring blades and bully-boys of the University he had scarcely as yet so much as placed an uncertain foot on the fringe of the Underworld. It was one thing, as his caution assured him, to bubble taverners of their meat and drink, to be jolly with doxies in a pot-house, and to foment brawls between drunken students and sober citizens; and quite another thing to pass from a Lubberland of pranks and impish rowdiness into those subterranean circles where the criminals of Paris lurked and schemed. In those circles of course René de Montigny and Guy Tabarie and the major part of their friends and acquaintances moved at ease when they pleased, enjoying the freedom of the Underworld, although ostensibly they still abided in the upper air. But so far François had not chosen to cross the frontier that divided those whose mischief-making need fear no heavier punishment than a cudgelling or a temporary lodgment in a cell, from those who breathed their daily breath under the menace of Montfaucon and its gibbet. He was content with the supremacy which he had gained in the brotherhood of students, content to know that René and Guy, whose pupil he had been, now recognized him as their master in the gipsy art of life. Discreetly he closed his eyes and shut his ears to knowledge of their intimacy with the Underworld.

But now, as it seemed to François, was the moment when a little familiarity with that same Underworld might be of exceeding service to one that still breathed at relative ease in a clearer atmosphere. He that matched himself against Sermois, or, to put it more fitly, was forcibly matched against Sermois, matched himself against a very damnable antagonist. Against such an antagonist any aid seemed fair, and the one advantage that François had over his adversary was that François was a Parisian and that his adversary was not. The ungainly provincial might have swelled into the Italianate semi-grandee; he might be able to give and

gain obedience to the darkest orders in those Italian cities where he had thriven in infamies; but in Paris he was, as François cheerfully assured himself, like a drunken sailor without chart or compass in a sea riven with reefs and crossed with complicated currents. François himself was not a fully licensed mariner on those same wild waters, but he had friends among those that were, and those friends he was resolute to seek immediately. René de Montigny was his first thought, with Guy Tabarie for a bad second, generally to be found attached to the first-named like an ear-ring to an ear. François set out at once to look for René.

In the dusk of the Fircone Tavern François found René and Guy, busily drinking with a huddle of choice spirits. A word in René's ear, a touch on Guy's shoulder, extracted the two friends from their company, and the pair withdrew together with François to a far corner and fresh measures of wine.

René looked narrowly at François over the edge of his cup.

"What's in the wind now?" he asked. "What do you want of us?"

Guy said nothing, but sucked noisily at his liquor and stared at François.

"I want help," François answered, "help against an enemy."

René whistled softly. Guy, trying to laugh and drink at the same time, choked and spluttered and spoiled both enterprises.

"Who is this enemy of our dear François?" René said softly, more as if he were speaking to himself than addressing anyone in particular. "Is it a naughty uncle who puts us on short commons of pocket-money? Or is it perhaps a perverse Provost who kicks us out of doors under pretence that we lack respectability, but in reality because we make sheep's eyes at his pretty wife?"

François smiled sourly at the suppositions of René.

"My uncle is something of a precise noodle," he said, "but he is no enemy of mine. Messire Robert is too much of a

chucklehead ever to dream that I could cherish a loving thought of his lady. I cannot blame him greatly for what he did; so he is no enemy of mine."

"Who, then," drawled René, "has been so insolent and so foolhardy as to provoke your enmity, my François?"

"Do you know," asked François, "that a certain great Italian nobleman has newly come to town?"

"You must not think," René chided gently, "that because you have the privilege to sleep under an ecclesiastical roof, and to be expelled from a gentleman's dwelling, that you are the only pedlar of polite knowledge. Our distinguished visitor to whom you allude has, I believe, the honour to be in some fashion distantly related to me. I have not, indeed, brought the fact under his notice, but it gives me an interest in his existence, nevertheless."

"In the train of this nobleman," continued François, "there is a fellow whose presence in Paris makes me uneasy, both for myself and for another. He now calls himself Filippo da Sermese, wears fine clothes and commands wealth; but he used to be plain Philippe Sermois, that went in ragged black and had never a penny. Why, you may even remember him, for he lectured once at the University years ago, when he called himself Brother Sententius."

"I had forgotten him, but I seem dimly to recall the name. By what you say, he seems to be a lucky fellow, and if I were not too much the gentleman, I should be inclined to envy him. But how does he come to be your enemy?"

"That is a long story," answered François, "and you may as well take my word for it that he is. Now I am very sure that he meditates some devilishness against me and against one that is more dear to me than the Muses Nine and the Graces Three, and all the rest of the Olympians, so I have come to you to learn if I can count on your help and strength in this adventure."

René twiddled his thumbs.

"Excellent François," he said, "you must know by this time that I cherish a high regard for your merits. Illuminate my mind. Let me know in what way you think that I can serve you."

"Why," responded Villon, "you have given me to understand, indirectly, more than once, that you have friends among the nether gentry"—here the voice of François, in spite of himself, dropped to a thin whisper—"among the Cockleshells."

After he had uttered the redoubtable trisyllable, he came to a pause and looked anxiously at René. The word "Cockleshell" was not one to be uttered lightly, even in a shady corner of the "Fircone," for it was the symbol of the most famous and dreaded fellowship of robbers in France.

René de Montigny smiled a cryptic smile and winked an enigmatic wink.

"I have the good fortune," he asserted sonorously, "to number many friends; and it is well within the limits of possibility that the list includes some members of the ancient and honourable confraternity to which you allude. Taking it for the moment for granted that such is the case—though, mind you, I admit nothing—then candidly, as man to man, I ask you, what of it? May not a man choose his friends, without question, for his own convenience, advantage or delectation? Shall I be challenged, shall I be brought to book, if I happen to be on terms of salutation with a member or so of the confraternity you mention?"

"Surely not," François assured him. "What I had in my mind was a hope that you might be persuaded to use your influence with such of those good people as you may chance to know to do me a good turn at this present."

"My dear young friend," said René, "there is and could be nothing that would afford me greater satisfaction than to render you any service, however insignificant or magnificent. Let us, therefore, assume that I am able to oblige, and tell me without loss of time what I can do for you."

"Is it in your power," François queried, "to have this Sermois so watched and spied upon that, unknown to him, all his daily actions might be recorded and reported to me?"

"My dear lad," answered René amiably, "the thing is as easy to the nimble wits as thieving to the nimble fingers. Your Sermois shall eat and drink, wake and sleep, in your very presence, as it were, if I, or some good friend of mine

at my instigation, pass the word to that effect among the Brotherhood. Your Sermois shall live in a house of glass, I promise you."

François began to formulate some grateful phrases, but René promptly cut him short.

"Sweet youth," he said, "we that are of the devil's legion must surely be ready at all times to help one another over a stile. But even in the devil's legion one good turn deserves another. If I give you my help in this instance, I take it for granted that I may count on your help if I should happen to need it in some moment of difficulty later on."

"That," François admitted, "is no more than fair. You may rely on my friendship whenever you may need it, so you do but serve me now against this fellow."

"My hand upon it, my heart upon it!" cried René, and reached a dingy claw across the table to clasp the fingers of François. Guy Tabarie, who had kept silence hitherto, now volunteered a suggestion.

"I should have thought," he observed solemnly, "that if this fellow troubled you, the best plan would be to get somebody to knock him on the head for you."

It was characteristic of Tabarie to advise that any such violent process as knocking on the head should be done by deputy. François shook his head and René smiled.

"Our François," he commented, "is too keen a sportsman for your rough-and-ready methods, my Guy. He is wishful to stalk his quarry, to snare his game according to the honourable and amusing rules of the chase. And now let us break camp and scatter, that I may go lime twig and set gin for this fellow that is reckless enough to make an enemy of that Hector of the taverns and Alexander of the University, the redoubtable Master François Villon, here present."

François knew that René was laughing at him, that René had for him something of the good-humoured contempt that your thorough-paced rascal naturally entertains for the outsider, the dabbler, the minnow-fish in the muddy waters of Styx. But he did not care so long as he gained his end.

Alone and unaided he could not hope to accomplish much, if anything, against so formidable an antagonist as Philippe Sermois. Thus he must needs take such allies as he could find and make the best of them, and if they chose to banter him, he must take the jest in good part. Therefore he grinned back at the grinning René, but in his heart he assured himself that he was the better man of the two and was much comforted by the assurance.

CHAPTER XXIX

FATHER AND DAUGHTER

A SOMEWHAT sleepy Huguette yawned at her noonday reflection in a hand-mirror and won a frank satisfaction from her image. She patted her fair hair; she stroked her sleek skin; she pinched with her little white teeth her full, red lips, to make them look redder; she stretched her fine limbs in a lazy languor. Her yesterday's meeting with François Villon, acting as it did like a warm breath on smouldering memories, tempted her mind to unfamiliar reflections. Huguette's mind was for most days and years the mind of an animal, one that loves to lie snug and eat well, one that fears harsh usage and responds, almost automatically, to caresses. But there was something more than this—a mind within a mind, as it were, which rarely quivered into existence, but which now for a little season emerged from its prison and looked curiously, if not shyly, about it. One thing Huguette was very sure of. She was glad to see François again. She did not even regret—save for his own sake—that he was so plainly in straitened case, or consider him, if he had been otherwise, as a possible successor to Poltrot de Haucqueton. Just she was—for the moment—pleased with the sight of her old playmate and their talk of old times.

And because she was pleased, and looked forward with a liveliness of interest which surprised her to the seeing him again, she had dressed herself in her best. She could not, in fact, have done better had she been expecting a visit from some great noble or wealthy burgess. Blue was ever her favourite colour, as she had told François, and to-day she sported her best gown of azure damask that was over-

worked with great roses of gold, and it fitted close to her shapely person and emphasized the suave lines to advantage. She had jewels on her hands and at her neck, and carried fine linen next her skin, and bore lace about her throat and bosom and wrists as if, for all the world, she had been a great lady. Indeed, she was far better dressed than, in the eye of the law, she had any right to be; but it may be that she was confident that the friendship of Poltrot de Haucqueton might prove sufficiently potent to cause the eye of the law to wink; and, anywise, she was not going abroad in her best finery to draw the world's attention to her wear, but was cosily nestled at home, awaiting the visit of her oldest friend, that oldest friend who, when last she saw him, was a little boy in a Parisian garret.

So when the chimes of the city told all listeners, heedful or heedless, that the sun was once more in his meridian, Huguette lifted herself a little from her lolling ease and waited more watchful. She found herself, something to her wonder, as eager for the coming of this poor student as if his pouch had been packed with gold counters. She had thought him oddly attractive, with his alert face, his eager gaze, his quaint speech, so coloured and flowered and fanciful, his pretty, cunning way of paying a compliment that made a half-jest seem more than earnest, his endless readiness of laughter. He certainly was not a handsome lad; he lacked inches this way and that way.; a sneer might call him puny; compassion might name him frail. But you forgot that he was plain when he talked, as you forgot the horn walls of a lantern when the kindly light was glowing within. What good company he would make of a summer's day for a stroll in the fields about Paris! What good company of a winter's night by the fire over a jug of spiced wine! Huguette found herself hoping that he would not be late for his trysting before the first stroke of noon had boomed, and the last stroke had scarcely died away before she heard a knocking at the door.

Huguette leaped to her feet briskly and was at the door in a flash. She flung it open, and a smile flooded her cheeks for François, facing her on the threshold, only to fade into

a grimace of vexation, as she instantly saw that he was not alone. Behind the slim form of the student stood a sturdy, burly fellow, of something more than middle age, with a shag head of grizzled, fair hair and a very ruddy face of a truculent comeliness still, with a pair of blue eyes set therein that were as keen and bright as her own.

"Huguette," said François, "here is a friend of mine who is very anxious to make your acquaintance, and whose friendship I think you may be pleased to accept. Suffer us to enter that we may talk together a little at our ease."

Now, though Huguette could not but admit that it was affable of François thus early in their rekindled intimacy to bring likeable clients to her abode, she had it in her heart to wish that on this morning he had been less considerate of her interest and a better guesser of her wish, which was to have his company alone. But there was no help for it, and so with the best grace she could command she drew back from the door, and invited her visitors to enter and make themselves at home.

François and his companion obeyed her invitation nimbly, and as soon as the pair had entered the student drew apart to a far corner of the room, as if it were his intention to leave the responsibility of the interview to the new-comer. Huguette, puzzled by this proceeding, stared at the stranger, who in his turn stared hard at her, with a curious expression of mingled amazement and gratification upon his weather-beaten face. While Huguette had stood in the door, ere she gave them entrance, her face was in shadow, and the features difficult to distinguish; but in the clearer light of the room she was plainly visible, and the fact had its odd effect upon the spectator. His persistent, perplexing stare was beginning to irritate Huguette, already slightly annoyed by the disturbance of her hopes, and she was about to demand with some sharpness what the good man's business might be, and why he regarded her so steadfastly, when the man turned to François and spoke with something like a chuckle in his gruff voice.

"By the Mass," he protested, "there is no mistaking the kinship. With a shift of light or so, and another guessway

with the hair, a body might very well believe that it was Ambroise who stood before us."

François, watching the pair with heedful scrutiny, noted now how strong was the likeness of Huguette to Messire Ambroise de Loré. It was a much more assertive likeness than the resemblance of the woman Ambroise to her father, though the resemblance existed there too markedly enough, but not so marked as in the present case. Huguette, it would seem, was like Ambroise d'Estouteville, because she was yet more like Messire Ambroise de Loré. It was a remarkable example of the impressive force of Messire Ambroise's manhood, that these two children of his, by different mothers, should both by reason of their common resemblance to him have so strong a suggestion of resemblance to each other. It was true, as François learned later from Messire Ambroise, that both the mothers were fair-haired women of a type that the rough soldier had specially a mind for, a fact which aided Nature in a strange result.

Huguette looked from the speaker to François with an impatient glance and knitted, interrogative brows. Messire Ambroise saw the glance and interpreted it readily enough. "Tell her the tale, lad," he ordered, "for there is no mistake about it." And as he spoke he flung himself into a chair, that he might gaze at greater ease upon the lineaments of his newly-found offspring.

"Little Huguette," François began, unconsciously speaking as if time had swung back with them, and they were once again in their childish days, "this good gentleman who has done you the honour of waiting upon you is Messire Ambroise de Loré, who was sometime Provost of Paris; who was, is, and always will be, a gallant soldier and a great noble"—here, indeed, Villon allowed himself to be carried away by the dramatic quality of the situation, for he was well aware of Messire Ambroise's questionable right to high gentility—"and, which is of more immediate concern to you, and the direct reason of this visit, who has the happiness to declare himself to be your father."

As François spoke these momentous words Huguette, with heightened cheeks and heaving bodice, gaped alter-

nately at the speaker and at the stalwart veteran in the chair like one that hears, indeed, speech, but cannot credit, or indeed understand, what is said. Half amused, half grieved, by her perplexity, Messire Ambroise rose from his chair.

"What the lad says is gospel truth, my girl," he declared. "I am indeed your daddy, and glad to find you such a handsome piece. Come to my arms, my lass."

Now as this was an invitation which Huguette was very well accustomed to receive and very well accustomed to obey, she lost no time in tripping across the room and throwing herself daintily and dutifully upon the ample chest of Messire Ambroise, who hugged her as a bear might hug its cub. Huguette gasped for breath when the old warrior released her, and positively entertained a fear that she had been squeezed shapeless by that terrific embrace. But having assured herself that this was not the case, she smiled pleasantly upon Messire Ambroise and wondered what would happen next.

What did happen was that Messire Ambroise, after another good stare at her, took her upon his knee and told her of his love-affair with her mother and of its tragic conclusion, and he showed her the paper which had been found upon her when she was a baby, the paper that he had given to her mother in the days long dead, and that Master François had brought to his notice only on the yesterday. It was all too remote to touch Huguette very much, and the manner of her mother's death had long been familiar to her; so she listened, dry-eyed and wide-eared, chiefly concerned, it is to be feared, with curiosity as to what this new-found gentleman father was going to do for her.

When Messire Ambroise had finished his story, he called upon his daughter to tell her tale, which accordingly Huguette did, with a fullness and frankness that left her hearer in no need of further enlightenment. When she had finished, Messire Ambroise patted her soft cheeks with his big hand.

"Well, well," he said; "it is easy to see that you are your father's daughter in temper as well as in flesh. You are

no song-bird for a family cage, I reckon. You must perch on the wild trees, my peregrine. But be assured of this, whatever you have been in the past you shall be your own mistress in the future, and be free to love when and how you please. I loved your mother, and it may be I should have used her better than I did. If that be so, I must make amends to the daughter. What name do you go by, child?"

Thereupon Huguette explained that she had never known any other name than her Christian name of Huguette, with sometimes some kindly epithet tacked on to it, as "the fair," or "the dainty," or "the debonair." The name of the Burgundian that had been so long her master, and that sometimes chose to pass as her father, was, as far as she knew, Bertrand le Noir; but, perhaps because of her own exceeding fairness, she had never carried his name.

"Why, then," said Messire Ambroise, "what better can you do than bear your mother's name. She was a du Hamel, of a poor but honourable family; be you Huguette du Hamel in your turn. And because I have the good luck to be well-to-do, I will settle upon you the revenue of a goodly portion of broad land, so that you need never want money for eating and drinking as long as you live. And now give me a kiss, Huguette du Hamel, for the sake of the Huguette du Hamel that I loved and lost long since."

Huguette lowered her soft flower-face to the face of the bronzed soldier, and kissed him gently and tenderly. She was more content at the good fortune that had thus suddenly come to her than touched by anything that another—such as François, for instance, standing apart and listening—might have found pathetic in the narratives of father and daughter. So there was no fond moisture to dim her bright eyes, and if she kept silence, it was only because she was somewhat at a loss what to say under very unexpected circumstances. Messire Ambroise gave her an affectionate salute, and then taking her by the waist, lifted her from his knee and set her square upon her feet. Then he rose himself and looked from Huguette to François with a jovial grin.

"Lord!" he protested, "here is a queer business. Here am

I, old Ambroise de Loré, face to face in my decline with a Huguette du Hamel, even as I was in my prime. You are not like your mother, my girl. You take more after your father, both in face and nature, which is perhaps as well for you in a rough and ready world."

He dipped his hand into his pouch and produced a large and evidently well-filled purse, the sight of which made the eyes of François glisten and his lips twitch. He poised it on his great palm, then cried "Catch!" and jerked it through the air towards Huguette, who caught it deftly and hugged it to her breast with an enthusiasm that made Messire Ambroise roar with laughter. The sight of him so merry and jolly was contagious, and both Huguette and François crackled with laughter out of sympathetic good-fellowship.

"Well," said Messire Ambroise, when he had brought his mirth to an abrupt termination by biting it in two, as it were, and swallowing the larger share, "yonder bag is a sum on account, in earnest of what I yet mean to do for you, my dear, of which you shall be duly assured in good time. I mind me that I have a small estate of Pourras, near Paris, on which there stands an abandoned abbey. This shall be your property, Huguette, for I swear you would make an adorable abbess."

At this sally they all laughed heartily again, as if it were the best joke in the world, as, indeed, Messire Ambroise believed it to be. Then Messire Ambroise continued:

"It may be that I shall not see very much of you, lass, in the future, for, as our François will tell you, I am a family man, and my lady my wife is inclined to look a little sourly upon my transgressions of yesterday. But if this is the first time I have ever seen you, it need not be absolutely the last, and if ever you should be in serious need of my aid and comfort, you can send me a message by some safe hand which will bring me to your side. God bless you, my child! You have chosen a life—or rather a life has been chosen for you—which demands the exercise of as much sound sense, tact and discretion, together with as great a need for a high spirit and a cheerful accommodating disposition, as any other business under Heaven. I wish you all health

and success in your ventures, with this thought for a back-piece, that you may one day light on some likely lad"—here it seemed to François as if Messire Ambroise glinted at him with the tail of his eye—"and make a match of it, and live happy ever after, as they say in the fairy-tales."

He nodded his head gravely and quitted the room, leaving François and Huguette staring at one another.

CHAPTER XXX

UNDER OBSERVATION

WHATEVER reason the Sieur René de Montigny might have for obliging Master François Villon, apart from ordinary natural affection or admiration, he certainly did prove as good as his word and contrive to oblige him. He dived lightly and easily into the dim waters of that mysterious pool of crimes, infamies and obscenities which was known to its familiars with a smile, and to the rest of the city with a shudder, as the Court of Miracles; and he emerged from his immersion with a grin of satisfaction upon his olive-tinted countenance. It is probable that he enjoyed the joke of setting the forces of darkness to work against a rogue of another fellowship at least as much as he appreciated the pleasure of doing a good turn to François Villon. René de Montigny always felt that under happier conditions he would have made an excellent diplomatist, an admirable statesman. It was, therefore, with a very decided sense of exhilaration that he found himself weaving the webs of mystery and pulling the strings of power.

It might easily surprise some person of importance if he realized the facility with which a watch could be established upon his goings and comings, while he remained in complete ignorance of the espionage. It is certainly scarcely possible to doubt that it would have greatly amazed that distinguished Italianate gentleman, the Count Filippo da Sermese, if he could have known how persistently, if unobtrusively, he was dogged. To Sermois, enveloped in his megalomania, there existed no plane of action below that in which he conceived and executed his schemes. Wary and daring

with regard to those whom he considered as his adversaries, he was indifferent to, because ignorant of, antagonists who were far more dangerous. He was wholly unaware that he was subject to the daily, hourly scrutiny of the people of the Underworld. His pride disdained to recognize that there was always a beggar cringing at his gate. He ignored some limping cripple at the corner of the street, who made no move to follow when he passed by, but who sent, by the whistling of an air or the tapping of a staff upon the cobbles, a signal to some other ragged nonentity at a little distance, who either leisurely took up the pursuit of the unconscious quarry or dispatched a further message to some beggar-sentry beyond.

It is curious and amusing to think of one who believes himself to be a champion plotter thus environed, all unawares, by unknown, undreamed-of counter-plotters. Sermois, while he prided himself upon his power and his cleverness, was, if he could but have known it, no better than some savage and stupid wasp, for whose entanglement a hundred unseen webs were busily spinning. The word had gone forth from that cauldron of iniquities, the Court of Miracles, that to please the Sieur René de Montigny a certain gentleman in the train of an Italian nobleman visiting Paris was to be put under observation. And put under observation he accordingly was, with a persistence which was the more ironical because it was so completely unperceived.

It was, therefore, with an easy smile at the simplicity of the game that René greeted François on the occasion of their first meeting after the myrmidons of the Underworld had been slipped upon the track of Philippe Sermois. Yet at the same time, it had to be admitted, when the sum and substance of all the knowledge that the Underworld had garnered was set forth, that there was, so far, really nothing very wonderful to recount.

Sermois, it appeared, was in the habit of visiting a certain ancient house in a rookery of ancient houses in the not too distant neighbourhood of the tower of St. Jacques. This house, which had all the appearance of being uninhabited

so far as the unkempt and shuttered condition of its outward appearance was concerned, was, it seemed, actually in the care and charge of a queer old man, who lived in the cellarage and who admitted Philippe Sermois on the occasion of his visits. It was believed and believable that Sermois made some special signal as he knocked at the door, for whenever he paid the place a visit he was instantly admitted, whereas an emissary of the Underworld, who feigned in drunkenness to mistake the house, knocked at the door and knocked in vain. He might as fruitfully have tapped and hammered at the lid of a sarcophagus. Judicious inquiries in the neighbourhood discovered nothing that might help to elucidate the mystery, if mystery there were. The house had belonged, in the memory of the oldest inhabitant of the district, and still belonged, for aught that the oldest inhabitant or the youngest inhabitant knew to the contrary, to an ancient astrologer supposed to be of fabulous wealth, who devoted his time to the study of the stars, and was popularly esteemed to preserve his house from molestation by magic.

Another curious circumstance connected with this ancient building was that, though apparently abandoned and desolate by day, it had of late received certain strange nocturnal visitations. Men portering great bundles would present themselves at its portals in the uncanny hours after midnight, would, without need of knocking, be granted instant admittance, and would presently emerge burdenless and go their ways into the night. After this had happened more than once the untimely porters were dogged on their return journey, and were run to earth at the residence of an ancient Hebrew, a pluralist in trades, but whose main ostensible business was a traffic in rare and costly furniture imported from the Levant and the East.

To this shop René paid a day-time visit on the pretext of cheapening a Damascus dagger. Having tickled the cupidity of the dealer by setting certain costly weapons on one side for later consideration, René easily guided conversation into the channels he desired, and succeeded in eliciting the fact that the trader had one customer, of unknown name

but apparently large means, who made many purchases, but always insisted upon their being delivered to their destination in the small hours of the morning, an uncomfortable irregularity for which he was willing to pay a penalty.

The house that commanded the interest of François and the attentions of his friends stood in an obscure region to the north of the Place de Grève. Its dilapidated front frowned upon a street as narrow and dirty as any passageway in that labyrinth of narrow and dirty streets. It formed part of a kind of island which at one time, in a more affluent past, had represented a single mansion with outbuildings, stables, and high, forbidding walls surrounding a large garden. But with the progress of years and the deterioration of the neighbourhood, the walls had fallen like those of Jericho, and in their place and on their site, and in the place and on the site of the stables and outbuildings had arisen a fringe of lean, gaunt, meagre edifices, which were speedily populated as thickly as any rabbit-warren with a quantity of poor folk of all manner of occupations and many degrees of respectability, but all claiming to be in some sense of the word respectable, and considering themselves as very definitely divided from the more or less criminal and the decidedly criminal denizens of the jumble of filthy houses in the network of filthy alleys that radiated from the vicinity of the Court of Miracles.

Only the garden remained uninvaded, if not unchanged, an ironic appanage to the original dwelling, recalling its former pride as a faded velvet mantle might that of some beggared, discredited gentleman. Surrounded now on all sides by ugly houses, it presented something of the appearance of a disreputable oasis in the midst of a disreputable desert. Years had passed away since last the hand of any gardener had striven to trim and tend its vegetation and keep the soil in flourishing condition. Its grasses flourished rankly; its trees, returned to their natural savagery, mounded the soil with yearly litters of leaves that were never removed. Nobody ever took such air as the place afforded, for it was still a possession of the owner of the house, and whoever that owner might be he never showed

his nose in the deserted garden. Nor were the neighbours able, had they been so inclined, to use it for the stretching of their limbs; for at the backs of all those houses that formed a funnel around the open space the lowest windows were no lower than the height of the former walls, and therefore rendered any entry to the place a feat too difficult, save with the aid of a long ladder, to be worth the while of the busy residents. Therefore, the only use the garden had for them was as a spot whereon to throw refuse and rubbish from their malodorous abodes.

Curiosity, even idle curiosity, was at all times a characteristic of the nature of François. He liked to mingle in crowds, to listen to scraps of casual conversation, to follow people in the street, just to learn—unprofitable knowledge—whither they might happen to be going. If he could be so nimble of interest where mere trivialities were concerned, it was but reasonable that the hint of a mystery should stimulate in him the spirit of investigation. In all probability René's story of the queer house would have tempted him to pry, even if there had been no further reason for the attempt. But when that house proved to be the nest of such a sinister cuckoo as Philippe Sermois, the flame of Villon's curiosity burned hotly. Sermois was his proclaimed enemy; Sermois menaced one dear to him. Here were sufficient reasons for justification, if justification were needed, of an effort to find out what Sermois was about. François promptly resolved that he would, for his own satisfaction, try to find out why Sermois had chosen to make himself master of so decayed and unsavoury a residence in so out-of-the-way a neighbourhood.

There was no difficulty—beyond the overcoming of physical repulsion—in establishing a footing in the unsavoury republic that had asserted itself over decayed and degraded magnificence. But that same process of overcoming physical repulsion was none too easy or too pleasant a job. François had come to be neither particular nor fastidious; he consorted with frowsy companions, and was familiar enough with many kinds of uncleanliness. But he liked to lie sweet as he lay still at the Red Gate, where his uncle's

disfavour had not gone the length of denying him lodgment; and to dream of lying sweet in any chamber of any one of those rookeries was very desperately to court disillusion and discomfiture. Yet it would be necessary, if not to lie, at least to lodge for a time in one of those horrid houses, if any effective investigation of the mysterious dwelling were to be carried out. So François conquered his qualms, swallowed his repugnance, and set himself to the not very difficult business of finding himself a niche in one of the unclean tenements. Happily for François, success in this enterprise, however disagreeable in its immediate consequences, did not involve the most disagreeable of all, which was, namely, the expenditure of any considerable sum of money. François was financially in that low water in which it was now habitual for him to wade; but a few lucky throws of the dice with a more opulent friend diminished in some degree that friend's fairer fortune, and gleaned for Villon's exchequer a sufficient number of small coins to permit him to approach the question of temporary residence in a new abode with confidence.

After a few inquiries and experiments François finally succeeded in getting pretty much the accommodation he needed at pretty well the price he was willing, or indeed able, to pay for it. He had a week's mastery of a wretched room enough, that seemed to have been shaped out of an odd corner that had somehow or other come to be overlooked in the general construction of the rest of the house; but it had the essential advantage that its single squalid window looked out upon the deserted garden, and the further merit of being no higher up than the third floor, so that to a nimble young gentleman with his wits about him and rejoicing in the possession of a stout ladder of rope the problem of gaining access to the garden did not seem to present any serious difficulty. A ladder of rope, therefore, a horn lantern and a small crowbar constituted the major parts of the effects that François carried with him into his new residence on the day when he took possession.

But when François, under cover of a summer night, made his essay in housebreaking, he was more puzzled than il-

luminated by the result of his pains. He gained the garden easily enough. He made an easy entry by way of an ill-shuttered cellarage, whose frail defence yielded to a touch and would almost have yielded to a breath. Once inside, he found himself, with the cautious aid of his carefully-hooded lantern, in the lower lands of a very aged and very dirty domicile. Heavy snoring in a subterranean room rather proclaimed than betrayed the inactive presence of the place's guardian. On tiptoe, Villon ascended rotting stairs, until he found himself in a large hall. At one end was a great door that gave on to the street. Hard by was an oaken settle as roomy as a bed and as massive as a monument. From the end of the hall opposite the door rose a splendid flight of stairs with richly-carved balustrades. Warily ascending this staircase, he came to a small landing, from which the staircase rose again in a directly opposite direction to its start. Then again came a landing faced by folds of heavy curtains. Pushing through these and peering about him with the aid of his unveiled lantern, François found that he had come into a room that was in startling contrast with the rest of the ancient, crazy mansion. For this room was cleanly kept and richly furnished; hung with gay hangings and thickly carpeted; and though its windows, like all the others, were solidly shuttered from the outer world, it boasted the means of ample lighting in the presence of several noble lamps of oriental race. Investigation revealed that the curtains at the further end of this room masked a small chamber which contained a couch.

Truly, the room was like a pearl in a muck-heap, but it did not plainly answer the enigma of its existence. François, baffled and irritated, took his leave gingerly and returned to his disagreeable eyrie to dream confused dreams and to wake no wiser than he had been on the preceding day.

CHAPTER XXXI

BY THE TOWER OF ST. JACQUES

IT seemed to the bubbling imagination of François that all Paris was just then no more than a big battle ground for the struggle between him and Sermois, and that all good Parisians were so many tensely interested followers of the contest. Of course, he was well aware at the back of his brain that his dear city was tranquilly unconscious of the conflict, and no less tranquilly indifferent to its result, and that the only persons really interested in the business were Sermois and himself, with perhaps a few of his rakehelly comrades, such as Montigny and Tabarie. Huguette, indeed, would have shown the liveliest interest in the welfare of François if she had known that he was in peril and planning to avert it. But Huguette knew nothing of the matter. François gave her much of his company, for she liked his companionship, and made it plain that she liked it; but he carried to her only a smiling face and a cheerful voice and easily persuaded her that, save for a limitless lack of money, he had not a care in the world. Yet François felt oddly confident that if he needed it he could count on the friendship of Huguette more surely than he could count on the friendship of any of the jolly dogs with whom he diced and drank at the "Fircone" and elsewhere.

Between the pair, so long separated, so oddly brought together, a strong friendship was established, one that could scarce have been stronger if they had never been parted. That it was as yet no more than a friendship was due, curiously enough, more to François than to the girl. Huguette had already sent Poltrot de Haucqueton to the right-about, and she would very willingly have permitted Villon to be

his successor. But to the man, somehow, the woman's resemblance to Ambroise seemed to come between them like a sheet of glass or a sheet of ice, behind which beauty was visible but not attainable. Such being the humour of François, Huguette accepted it with a smile and a sigh, and the pair tasted the world together like jovial comrades. Huguette would cheerfully have shared her good fortune with her friend, but to this François, unusually scrupulous, would by no means consent, though he was not so nice or precise as to refuse to feast now and again at the girl's dwelling.

At the end of one such feast, of a fine night of early summer, it came into Huguette's head that a stroll in the open air would be pleasant. François agreed blithely enough, for he was ever a padder and ambler, and in a few seconds they were tramping the streets together.

The June evening was very fine, the air mild and kind, and a great yellow moon riding high in a blue heaven. Huguette, swinging joyously on Villon's arm, savoured the pleasure of the summer night as if it were a sweetmeat or a sweet wine.

"Do you remember," she said to her companion, "how when we were little things we used to play games of being kings and queens and God knows what?"

François nodded. He remembered very well. It was a far cry to those long-ago days. The ripple of the intervening years had borne the boats of their souls to strange harbours. The girl-queen of those babyish games was by now a mountebank, a light o' love, her fairness stained through and through. The boy-king was become a reprobate, a ragamuffin, renegade to the dreams, beliefs, ideals of his youth. Truly they were brother and sister in degradation; they were still no more than brother and sister in their newly-recovered friendship.

"I remember," François said, and forced himself to laugh. After all, life was laughable if you looked at it in the right way. Huguette snuggled a little closer to him.

"Let us be boy and girl again," she whispered. "Let us play one of the old make-believes."

"What do you mean?" François asked. He was puzzled

by the suggestion; did not understand. Huguette explained.

"I want you," she said, "to play at fairy-tales again. I want you to pretend to be in love with me, to adore me, to worship me. For to-night, just for to-night, you are the beautiful young prince and I am the beautiful young princess, and you must woo me as if this world and the world hereafter depended upon the weight and cunning of your words."

François made a wry face as he heard the girl speak of the beautiful young prince. He thought of his shabby clothes, his wine-drenched mind, his empty pockets, his desperate condition. And as for her, she was beautiful indeed, and with a fatal beauty of resemblance of which she was ignorant but which made her half enchanting; yet she was far removed from the dream-princess of a fairy-tale. None the less, the mere hint of a fairy-tale was sufficient to lift Villon's mercurial spirits. If life was a jest—and such was the text of his daily sermon—why, then, let it be a merry jest. It ought not to be difficult on such a night of summer to feign a tender passion for the comely creature by his side.

Wherefore he drew the stop of his most exalted humour; let his fancy play and stray for the girl's entertainment; and praised her and wooed her with such whimsical variety and dainty prettiness of phrase and conceit as made the girl laugh and marvel, while something like a blush struggled with the false colour of her cheeks and something like a tear softened the mocking provocation of her eyes.

"You are lovelier than Helen of Troy," he murmured, "Helen for whose sake great princes sailed the seas and died in the trenches before Priam's town, for whose sake innocent pink maidens were sacrificed as if they were of no more account than so much calves' flesh; for whose sake a shepherd that was also a king's son, though he died dismally enough by the bolt of an archer who suffered from a sore toe, will always be estimated by poets and madmen the happiest of men, because he was once your lover. Helen, Helen, Helen, it is wise and right and divine that you are alive to-night in the town that bears the name of your lover.

For Paris was the name of your lover long ago by the waters of Scamander, and Paris is the name of the city today which is, as it were, the symbol of many lovers."

Huguette laughed happily at the prattle of François, and François, with a pang, caught in her laughter that quaint note of manliness which was always ambushed in the laughter of Ambroise, and was the heritage of a common paternity. Huguette did not in the least understand what François was talking about. She had never heard of Helen, or Troy, or of any other Paris than the Paris in which at that moment she was walking; but she knew that his speech sounded tender, and that his words were courteous and wooing, and that it gave her amazing pleasure to hear him. And so, babbling and chattering, they drifted through the magic of the night, until by and by they found themselves underneath the shadow of the Tower of St. Jacques that seemed to stand there, a fretted obelisk, to support the mellow disc of the moon. Villon suggested that they should seat themselves on the stone seats that ran around the tower, and Huguette agreed on the condition that he would go on telling her fairy stories. So they sat there for a while, looking at the fantastic images wrought by the moonlight, while Villon continued to tell tales, in all of which the hero was a young gentleman with more scholarship than fortune and more wit than scholarship, who was in love with a beautiful girl that resembled the heathen goddess Venus.

He was in the midst of these legends and mightily absorbed in them, watching the girl's face while he talked, and noting eagerly, with the satisfaction of the artist, the effect of his fancies when a thing happened that interrupted his narrative. The place where they sat was a place where many people passed, coming and going, people who paid no manner of heed to a man and woman seated in the comfortable shadow of the tower. But just as Villon was twisting and skipping impishly on the summit of his pyramid of imagination, his attention was arrested by the appearance of some new figures on the causeway. Three lean, black patches floated in the pool of moonlight that flooded the

ground at a little distance from the foot of the tower. These were the shadows of three men. One walked ahead, muffled in a great cloak, and the others followed, bearing burdens on their shoulders under the weight of which they went heavily. As the cloaked leader went by the tower, he seemed suddenly to catch sight of the face of François, and to find a meaning in the sight, for he halted and stared, and, staring, got a glimpse of the face of Huguette. Huguette saw the halt and caught the stare, and instinctively drew back into shadow and pulled her hood about her face, hiding it. As for Villon, he gave a little gasp of surprise, for he knew in a moment the foremost man. He was Philippe Sermois, and Villon thrilled with excitement as he recognized his enemy. But he thrilled, too, with a kind of wonder, for the two men that were bearing burdens, though they drew back when Sermois came to a halt, and appeared to seek the cover of the profoundest shadow, seemed to be familiar figures to Villon. One was tall and thin; the other was short and stout. He could almost have believed that the pair were René de Montigny and Guy Tabarie. But his mind was swiftly diverted from them, for Philippe Sermois swung his swollen body out of the moonlight into the lamplit darkness where François sat with Huguette alert and tense beside him.

In the flutter of fish-oil François could see that the encarnadined face was strained with an eager fierceness very evil to behold. But though his eyes were wickedly hostile, and hostile the fixed grin on his features, there was a false hilarity and joviality in his voice that gave Villon gooseflesh with its horrid falseness.

"Salutations, gallant lad," he said, with a sweeping gesture of mock courtesy, and his voice was harsh with its sham warmth and its cold ferocity. "So we keep tryst with pretty women in the shadow, do we?"

François was not a little taken aback by the sudden irruption of Philippe Sermois into his idyll. But his wits were alert enough to decide that, all things considered, it might be as well that his foe should not see the face of Huguette, if he had not already seen it. So he whispered to her to

keep her face covered, which she did, though from the dark hollow of her hood she watched Sermois closely. As for François, he chose to answer Sermois with a like false show of gaiety.

"Is there any reason," he questioned, "why I should not pass the time of night with a maid if it pleases me to do so?"

Sermois scowled very vilely while François spoke, and when he had made an end, Sermois thrust his scowling visage close to the face of François.

"There is no reason at all, little gentleman," he answered, with a sneer in his voice. Even in his agitation, François felt annoyed that Sermois must needs harp upon his moderate stature.

"Then why do you trouble me?" François protested impudently; but Sermois cut in upon his protest, as one that continues a speech begun.

"There is no reason at all, little gentleman, why you should not pass the time of night here in the quietude of St. Jacques' with a maid, if it pleases you to do so. But surely the case would be different if your fair one were no maid, but the wedded wife of some wronged and honourable gentleman."

The heart of François was heavy when he heard these words, for it seemed probable to him now that Sermois must have caught a glimpse of the face of Huguette, and in his madness believed her to be Ambroise. Yet he could not be sure of this, and as he did not wish, by revealing Huguette, to surrender any advantage which her resemblance might be to him, he spoke again, answering the challenge of Sermois in a manner of banter.

"Why, Messire Philippe, it is no part of the law of civility that one honest gentleman shall yield to another the name of such fair lady as may choose to keep him friendly company. But because there is no secrecy about my business, I will make no bones about telling you the name of my comrade. She is called Robinette the Delicate, and she dwells in the quarter of the Markets. And now pray go your ways and leave me to my affairs."

Sermois burst into a mocking laugh.

"My little friend," he said, "you seem to be a more fortunate fellow than I guessed, and more favoured as a lady's man. But what I have foretold will come true, and I think your time is drawing nigh."

He swung on his heel as he spoke and made a sign to the two bundle-bearers who had stood patiently aloof in the darkness all this while. At the signal they followed him as before, and again as they moved their figures seemed to suggest to François his familiar friends. But soon all three were swallowed up in the darkness, and François and Huguette were once again alone together.

CHAPTER XXXII

MONTIGNY BRINGS NEWS

WHO is that man?" asked Huguette eagerly. "I have never seen his face before, but I am very sure that I have heard his voice. Where, where?"

She put her hands to her head, as if in hope that the physical pressure would serve to awaken a sleeping memory. François watched her thoughtfully, and wondered how much he should tell her. She shook her head impatiently.

"I cannot remember," she said, "but strange voices stick in my memory, and I have never heard a stranger voice than that fellow's. Nor have I ever seen an uglier face. Surely he is an enemy to you?"

"He is indeed my enemy," said François. "You are in the right there, and in the right, too, to think that you have never seen his face before, but that you have heard his voice. Listen, and I will tell you a strange tale."

And therewith François, after pledging her to secrecy, began to relate all that had happened since the first meeting with Philippe Sermois. It took some while in the telling, and Huguette listened with wonder and quick sympathy. Villon did not dwell on his boyish adoration of Ambroise, but Huguette seemed to guess it in spite of him. She heard with amazement of the likeness that existed between her and the woman that was in a way her sister. But François had barely made an end of his narrative when the talk of the pair was interrupted by the sudden appearance of one whom François instantly recognized as René de Montigny.

René saluted François with a most profound congee, and then burst into a fit of laughter so loud and so long that François glanced with some anxiety at the tower as one

that feared the effect on its solidity of such a thunderous reverberation. But the tower stood its ground; its feet were too solidly buried in the ancient soil to be stirred by any human hilarity, and François, his mind relieved, turned a surprised face towards Montigny and inquired the reason for his mirth.

The sides of René still shook, but he jerked the remaining ebullitions of noise from his body like so many bubbles, and pulled his face into its customary gravity before he answered.

"O my friend, you will never credit me if I tell you with what job I am commissioned. If I were to assure you that I have been commanded to take vows of continence and temperance for a month of Sundays, or that I have promised to undertake a barefoot pilgrimage to the shrine of Saint Iago of Compostella, you would belike be more ready to believe me."

"I am too familiar," said François gravely, "with your unalterable passion for the naked truth to entertain the faintest credulity as to any marvel stamped with the seal of your assurance."

"Hear, then," cried René, "hear and believe! I have been most duly and formally and solemnly charged with a mission to kidnap you."

Though he was prepared for some surprising statement, Villon was not prepared for this, and he started a little. So did Huguette, huddled by his side, and he felt her hands close in a tighter clasp upon his arm.

"To kidnap me!" he echoed. René nodded and looked wise.

"Even so," he declared. "Shall I say more now, or keep mum, for I see you have company."

"It is sure company," answered François, "before whom you may speak freely. This is the oldest friend I have in the world, save my mother, though, in truth, she is younger than I; and, as I believe, the dearest, again saving my mother. In a word, this is Huguette du Hamel that was my playmate when we were little children. Huguette, this is René de Montigny, who is one of my very good comrades."

Huguette, thus addressed, pulled back her hood and sat forward and took a good look at Montigny. He, on his side, gave her a stare of great admiration.

"I wish I had such childhood's playmates," he said, "to come back to me and play with me to-day, if I do not make too free with your ladyship's ears."

Huguette burst into a fit of laughter, which, it may be, served to conceal a little grief, a little bitterness in her heart. Then she rattled such a volley of canting talk at René as convinced that astute gentleman that Villon's fair companion was frankly free of all the confraternities of the road. She concluded by bidding him say what he had to say in Heaven's name and be quick about it, for if it touched François it touched her.

"Why," replied René, "it is even thus. You must know, most dear François, that I am empowered by a certain unlovely and unlovable individual that is pleased to call himself the Count Filippo da Sermese, to lay violent hands upon you, to pinion you, gag you, and deliver you, as helpless as a trussed chicken, into the tender custody of Messer Filippo. And where shall you be delivered, think you? Why, no other where than to that same mysterious dwelling where Messer Filippo sometimes chooses to skulk concealed."

"Why, this is news indeed," François commented, "if it be true news."

"It is as true," averred René, "and as wonderful as your own mirifical epic of the Devil's Whistle. Can I say more?"

"But how has it come about?" questioned François. He was sure by now that René was earnest in meaning, though his tone was jest. "How came this knave to charge you with this office?"

"I suppose because I am a knave as well," René responded, "though I thank my stars that I am a better-looking one."

He glanced at Huguette as he spoke and carried himself with a dashing air. But she took no notice of his apish tricks, for she was too busy listening and thinking.

"Tell your tale quickly," she said sharply, in a tone of command that caused René to lift his eyebrows a little. "Come to the point and drop your rhodomontade."

Thus adjured, René, who was not wont to be so harangued by the ladies of his acquaintance, consented to be brisker in the delivery of his relation.

"Simple as I stand here," he confessed, "I have the pleasure to inform you that I have the honour to be employed in the service of Messer Filippo da Sermese."

"How did that come to pass?" asked François.

"Why," answered René, "by the will of Providence, aided and abetted by the ripe wisdom and cool judgment of your humble servant, René de Montigny, here present."

At this point an expression of angry impatience upon the countenance of Huguette, now plainly visible in the moonlight, warned the speaker that one of his hearers, at all events, considered him to be rhodomontading again.

"I was standing the other day," he continued, "by mere chance of course"—here he favoured Huguette with a significant wink—"in the street, and hard by the door of the house where Messer Filippo da Sermese is pleased publicly to reside. A varlet was walking a fine horse slowly up and down in front of the dwelling, waiting, as it seemed, for Messer Filippo, who very presently came forth. I, pretending not to see him, straightway fell into an ecstasy of admiration over the steed, expressing myself in very voluble and choice Italian, for you must know, fair lady, that I have no small measure of Italian blood in my body, and the pith of every Italian dialect in my mouth. Messer Filippo, hearing me thus deliver myself, found, I suppose, some attraction in my words if not in my person, and in a little while we were deep in talk."

René paused and cocked his head on one side to see what effect his statement had upon his hearers. François interpreted the impatience that Huguette felt.

"What was the gist of your talk?" he asked. "What was the sting in its tail?"

René nodded his head and looked wise.

"Why, I hinted that if his honour happened at any time

to need the services of a handy fellow who was wholly without principle or compunction, and who could at all times rally to his whistle gentry of the like tough kidney, I, for my part, had a notion of where such a fellow was likely to be found. He looked me pretty tightly in the eyes, I can tell you, while I talked, but I think in the end some delectable ingenuousness in my countenance commanded him; for, to make a long story short, he took me into his service, on the strength of my assurance, which was indeed Gospel truth, that I knew the seamy side of Paris like my house, as the Arabs say."

"But how did he come to me?" François asked, and Huguette jerked her chin sharply forward, as if to assert that there was the important point.

"Why, in a little while, but very directly," René replied. "It was on the following day, as I remember, when I waited upon him at his command. First he asked me if I could secure the services of some lusty, trusty ruffians that would do anything in the world so long as they were paid for the doing it. My reply was a smile more eloquent and a nod more majestic than speech. Then he asked me, looking me straight in the face, if I knew anything of a certain poor scholar that was named by your name. To the which I made answer with a scowl, as if the sound of your syllables were so much poison, that I did indeed know of such a fellow, but desired no closer acquaintance. He lapped my leasing as a cat laps milk, and thereafter we easily settled our business. I was to pick up a few choice spirits, none of whom should by any chance be friend to you, for whom I was to be responsible in return for so many golden clinkers and jinglers."

"Here is no word of kidnapping," commented François, seeing that René came to a pause.

"That came later," René explained. "That came but now. Guy Tabarie, whom I made speed to present to my new master as the most desperate ruffian in the city, for all his seeming sheepishness, was bidden with me to wait upon his magnificence to-night. Did you not note us but now?"

"Oh, aye," said François, "I noted you and wondered."

"He bade us charge ourselves with certain sacks that from their shape and weight I judged to hold silver plate," resumed René, "and to follow where he led. He led us, as I guessed he would lead us, to a certain house you wot of, and that we wotted of, though we made as if we had never strayed in that direction before. But on our way he caught sight of you sitting there with your dainty, and he went and spoke to you, though we could not hear what he said. But he returned in a great fume of rage, and when we got to our destination and set down our sacks on the threshold, he pulled me of one side, and said he would pay me and Guy a hundred crowns apiece if we could contrive to lay you by the heels to-morrow evening and bring you a prisoner to his mouse-trap. But why he was so red hot against you all of a sudden is more than I know."

"I think I can understand," observed François. "But what reply did you make to this tempting bait?"

"That it was a ticklish business, but that we would do our best. I wish he could be persuaded to pay cash in advance, for I should like dearly to handle that hundred crowns, but of course it is out of the question."

"I do not see why it is out of the question at all," said François, who had been thinking deeply while René talked. "If this fellow has so great a mind for my company, I have no great mind to deny him his fancy. In a word, I am wishful to know what he would be after. So I shall be pleased and he will be pleased, and you shall earn your hundred crowns into the bargain."

"What in Heaven's name are you thinking of, François?" protested Huguette. "Are you such a simpleton that you will walk straight into this trap that has been set for you?"

"I shall not walk into it," François answered. "I shall be carried into it by my good friends, René and Guy. But what will happen thereafter shall be as the stars decree."

René was greatly tickled by the audacity of his friend, especially as it promised him a pocketful of money, and he gleefully agreed to meet François on the morrow and bring Guy with him and settle the details. He knew François well enough to be sure that he would not get into a scrape

unless he saw a way of getting out of it. But Huguette continued to be loud in protest till François silenced her.

"Have no fear," he said, "but leave me to work out my plan. If Master Philippe wants me, why, Master Philippe shall have me; but he may not prove so happy in the matter as he hopes, when all is said and done."

And with that Huguette, for the moment, was forced to be content.

CHAPTER XXXIII

TRAP AND COUNTER-TRAP

IT was, of course, wholly inconceivable to François that the Lady Ambroise d'Estouteville could be persuaded to lend the least ear or the least attention to any addresses that Sermois might presume to pay her. But, nevertheless, because of the menaces of Sermois, and because of the apparent madness of Sermois, François decided that it would be no ill thing to give the Lady Ambroise some word of warning. In happier days he would have been free to do so face to face, and by word of mouth. Now that he was not so favoured, he must needs content himself with writing. Write accordingly he did, and to this effect:

"MOST HONOURED LADY,

"Though your poor servant be out of favour, he is still your servant, and his service urges him to entreat you to beware of him who calls himself the Count Filippo da Sermese, for he is your husband's enemy and yours."

This letter he carried himself on the following morning betimes to the Provost's house, and there he spoke with his old friend and teacher of sword play, Gilbert, the keeper of the gate.

"I suppose, Gilbert," said Villon wistfully, "there is no little chance of my being permitted to have a minute's speech with my lady."

The old man-at-arms shook his head.

"No chance whatever, lad; not one so little as a barley-corn. You are denied to pass this threshold. Those are my orders and by them I must abide."

o be it," François acquiesced with a sigh, "since so it be. But at least it can be no breach of your consign liver this letter to my lady."

he spoke he pulled the letter from his jerkin and it it into Gilbert's fingers. The old soldier looked at it ously.

ou need have no hesitation," Villon assured him. "It ts nothing for myself. Only it tells my lady something may be of service to her."

Vell, well," consented Gilbert, "I will take it upon me liver it, but if it brings me into trouble, I shall, maybe, you with a broken head. Do you keep up your sword- lad?"

ançois assured him that he did, thanked him for con- ng to act as his messenger, wished him farewell and ed away. Gilbert was still staring doubtfully at the , and somewhat regretting that he had undertaken to er it, when he felt the impact of a heavy hand on his lder, and, turning, looked into the face of his lord, ire Robert d'Estouteville.

Vas François Villon here but now?" he questioned. "I ght I saw him from a window."

Ie was here," Gilbert admitted, "and he left this letter ny lady. Did I right or wrong to accept it?"

ou did right," Messire Robert replied. "But give it to I will take charge of it."

lbert, relieved to find that his master showed no sign of r, obeyed. He made no comment, vocal or mental, e his lord opened the letter and read it. Messire Robert st the letter into his pouch, and at that moment his e was brought to the door.

will deliver the letter myself by and by," he said to ert, who saluted gravely. And therewith Messire Rob- nounted and rode away and promptly forgot all about matter.

e was the less to be blamed for his forgetfulness, in he did not take the warning conveyed in the letter of çois at all seriously. He looked upon it, indeed, as a very ingenious attempt upon the young man's part to

curry favour in a quarter where he was now in disgrace. As to this Count of Sermese, whom Robert dimly remembered as a gentleman in the retinue of the Italian nobleman who had feasted at the Provost's house a while ago, what sort of an enemy was he? Such a problem would be easy to solve if solution were worth while. For, as Messire Robert, riding, recalled, he was supping with that same Italian nobleman this very evening, where he should probably see the man and judge of his capacity for himself, or with a well-placed question or two gauge him to a nicety. In the meantime, no need to trouble Ambroise with such foolishness. Having thus settled the trifle to his own satisfaction, Robert d'Estouteville banished it from his mind to make room for the consideration of more momentous civic matters, and, in consequence, as reported, forgot all about it. It so chanced that even if he had not forgotten it, the result would have been the same, for those momentous civic matters consumed his day, and he did not return to his own dwelling, but went at evenfall to the Italian noble's supper direct.

Spider Sermois, throned in his meticulous criss-cross, surveyed the intricate, patiently-spun web of his ingenuity complacently, and could not find any fault in the meshes. The meeting by the Tower of St. Jacques on the previous evening with François and his companion had spurred him into an unexpected rapidity of action; but it was only the firing of a train a little sooner instead of a little later. Already he had so prompted and prevailed upon his Italian patron that he had persuaded him to invite Messire Robert d'Estouteville to a banquet of noble gentlemen for the coming evening, and he knew very well that Messire Robert had accepted, and that Messire Robert would attend. He had not himself proposed in any case to be present at the festival. He had schemed to absent himself upon plea of sudden illness, and so find himself free to deal as he had dreamed with Ambroise. The sight, as he believed, of her clandestinely in the company of François only inspired an alteration, and, as he believed, an improvement in his plot. He had given certain instructions to his henchman on the

previous night, which he was confident would be carried out, and he rubbed his hands and hugged himself in anticipation of a very pleasurable adventure.

The plan that he had arranged with his confederates on the previous evening was that René, overcoming his commendable antipathy, was to force his acquaintance upon Villon, and lure him to some obscure tavern, there to gamble. Once there, François was to be hocussed in his drink to the point of helpless stupefaction, and then, under a pretence of being led home, to be conveyed to the mysterious dwelling in the northland of the Place de Grève. There François, pinioned and gagged, should be flung into a back room and left to fast and anguish until such time as Sermois should choose to come and play with him. So much of the scheme could be easily and safely left to subordinates. He had no doubt that René would have little difficulty in carrying out the enterprise. But there was a far more important part of his enterprise, the execution of which Philippe was resolved to carry out by himself. That, naturally, was the part which concerned itself with the Lady Ambroise. He was now more confident than ever that he should succeed in the snare which he had prepared, and he chuckled in preliminary enjoyment of an inevitable result.

Obedience to the law of consequences brought Master François Villon, betwixt the dusk and the dark of that same eventful day, to be a temporary resident in the dwelling which he had already investigated. His first visit was by the back door. His second was by the front door. On the first occasion he came on his feet. On the second occasion he came in a push-cart, swaddled in carpets and masquerading, in company with a number of weapons, as a bale of goods. He poetically likened himself to Egyptian Cleopatra conveyed to Roman Cæsar under similar conditions. At least, he hoped, thinking tenderly of the tender Ptolemaic flesh, not quite similar conditions. For it had to be admitted that if François travelled through Paris in a sort of state, at the expense of others' pains, he travelled very uncomfortably. René de Montigny and Guy Tabarie may have handled the push-cart as gingerly as possible, or, on the other

hand, spurred by an elfin spirit of humour, they may not. Even the fact that Huguette was giving a helping hand to his discreditable vehicle did not mend matters, for she was of as impish a spirit as René or Guy, and she manifested her resentment at the obstinacy of Villon in implicating himself in the business by adding an occasional jerk on her own account to the ramshackle transit of the push-cart over the millstone hard cobbles of Paris.

For Huguette had insisted on sharing in the adventure. If Villon would persist in thrusting himself into peril, why, she would thrust herself into peril, too. She was his playmate, his friend, his more than sister; he and she had found each other again after long years of separation; they were not to be sundered now by so little a thing as a risk. She spoke with such wild earnestness; she pleaded, or, rather, she commanded, with such extravagant alternations of tenderness and rage, that in the end Villon bowed his head to the sweet tempest, and Huguette had her way. She habited herself in man's habit—a thing she had often done before, she said, and always loved to do; and, indeed, she made a very comely, winsome and debonair lad of the travesty. She went with him thus to the tavern where François had his tryst with René de Montigny, and there she made the acquaintance of Guy Tabarie. This genial ruffian was amused, and at first inclined to be impudent; but Huguette so promptly put him in his proper place with her ferocious volubility of thief-talk and her staggering knowledge of the world, staggering even to one that had much of that knowledge and was not easily staggered, that the encounter of roguish wits ended in the complete downing of Guy Tabarie, who became thereafter her devoted and unquestioning slave.

Between them the four quaint knaves from the pack of rascaldom laid their heads together and hatched their plan of campaign. The confabulation resulted at dusk in the passage of the push-cart through certain streets of Paris to that house north of the Grève, where Sermois had made a mouse-trap which these four were resolved to turn into a rat-trap. René knocked the recognized signal on the door. It was duly opened by the queer old servant of the house.

Villon, in his carpeting, was conveyed into the house and laid on the floor at the foot of the stairs by Huguette and René, while Guy Tabarie ran the push-cart into an adjoining alley and left it to its fate. Then when all were inside and the door shut, René and Guy made short work of binding and gagging the queer old servant and conveying him to bed in the cellarage, while Huguette delivered François from his mummification, and disentangled him from the swords and daggers with which he was keeping company. Thereafter Guy was dispatched to the reputable lodging of Sermois, to inform him that the kidnapping had been successfully brought off, and François, Huguette and René made themselves comfortable in the one gorgeously furnished apartment in the ruined and rotting edifice. They had carried with them store of meat and wine; they had carried with them cards. They sat down to eat and drink and gamble with great cheerfulness, alertly ready for whatever happenings the deepening night might bring.

Guy Tabarie betook himself with creditable briskness to the noble lodging of Messer Filippo da Sermese. The distance was not great indeed, but it seemed no more than a single step to Guy Tabarie, so wholly was his mind occupied with the lively image of Huguette. She seemed to him the most wonderful, beautiful creature he had ever encountered, and his admiration of her wonder and her beauty was only heightened by her command of qualities and vocabulary not usually to be found in damsels of wonder and beauty, nor even among the dolls and doxies who were his familiar friends. Thus meditating and heartily wishing himself shod with Villon's shoes—for Guy, of course, took for granted what was not the case—he soon found himself at the portal of the lodging of Sermois, and was readily admitted to his splendidly dressed presence. Guy Tabarie, looking as simple and innocent as if butter would not melt in his mouth, told his tale of the triumphant capture of François to his hearer's very manifest delight. After paying the money agreed upon, Sermois commanded Guy to return to the mouse-trap house and resume guard over the captive, while he, Sermois, would repair thither

presently. So Guy Tabarie set off on his return journey, still thinking adoringly of his astounding amazon.

When Guy had departed, Philippe Sermois bestirred himself upon his own especial business. He girt himself with a fine Italian sword and dagger, thrust into the bosom of his doublet a sealed and superscribed letter, which he took from a secret drawer in his writing-table, muffled himself from head to heel in a hooded mantle, and sallied into the street and the night.

The moon that had been so illuminative on the previous night still lit up the June sky; but Philippe Sermois, preferring darkness, made his way among the shadows. His journey aimed for the goal of the Provost's house, but though it was longer than Guy Tabarie's, it, too, was lightened for the traveller by amorous thoughts.

Villon often used to wonder, in later days, when things were known to him of which at this moment he was wholly ignorant, what manner of mental action stirred the spirit of Philippe Sermois in that night's promenade. He came to the conclusion that it was probably nothing much above the momentary mood of predatory anticipation which animates the cat that stalks a sparrow or the fox that flings itself upon a hen. There was truly, he concluded, something amazingly animal, of the baser kind of animalism, something horridly unhuman, in the springs that set going the machinery of Philippe Sermois.

When Sermois reached the Provost's house he sought the keeper of the gate, and producing from his bosom the letter which he carried, he demanded of Gilbert if Messire Robert were at home. Though he was very well aware that Messire Robert was abroad, he took the news to that effect from Gilbert with an air of great concern. "For this letter," said he, "is of much moment and urgency, and if my lord cannot read it, it should at once to my lady, who may read it for him."

As Sermois backed this request by slipping a silver coin into the palm of Gilbert, the old soldier undertook to deliver the letter immediately; whereupon Sermois, after thanking him warmly and again urging the necessity for

dispatch, took his leave. He did not go very far, however, but took up his station at the mouth of a dark lane at a little distance from the Provost's house. There he waited, a black figure framed in blackness, counting the seconds as they sped into minutes, and speculating with alternate fits of hope and gusts of fear as to the result of his missive.

In the meantime, Gilbert had caused the missive to be conveyed by the means of another servant to the hands of the Lady Ambroise, who received it with some little surprise on learning that the bearer had, in the first case, inquired for her lord, and had then directed that the letter should be delivered to her for her immediate perusal. Instantly she opened it and read thus with a surprise that grew like a fire.

"Most dear and honoured lord and lady," it began, "this is from your poor servant ever, François Villon, who lies at his mother's lodging grievously sick of his wounds that he got in a just quarrel this day. He entreats you to visit him this night, for indeed he fears that he may not endure till morning, and he has that to tell which nearly concerns you. He writes this by the hand of a faithful friend, being himself too feeble to hold the pen. This friend will wait a while at the corner of the street of the Little Sword, in the earnest hope that one or other of you will come to me. He will guide you to the humble house where your servant lies ill at ease, with his poor mother weeping by his bed."

The composition of that letter had cost Sermois no little care and labour, for he wished so cunningly to frame it that, while it should appeal very directly to the woman for whose eye it was penned and at whose heart it was aimed, it should at the same time be such an epistle as might freely be read by another than Ambroise. Though Sermois believed that Messire Robert's wife was the mistress of François Villon, he was shrewd enough to understand that François, supposing him to be in the sad straits which the letter represented, could never venture to send to his lover a letter which should betray any hint of the guilty secret. The fact

that the letter was addressed to both the lord and the lady of Estouteville, and that it made its piteous appeal to them both, was of itself sufficient to disarm any suspicion in Messire Robert's mind if Messire Robert had been present when the letter was delivered. For Sermois recognized that though he knew very well that Messire Robert would not be present, his imaginary hurt Villon could by no means count upon such a circumstance. So he flattered himself that the letter was very deftly schemed to draw a loving woman to her lover's sick bed without at the same time putting her, as she would think, to the slightest risk in so doing.

To Sermois, waiting in the shadow of the street of the Little Sword, the seconds that had ticked into minutes seemed to be so many immeasurable hours. Suddenly his impatience was stayed by the sight of a cloaked and hooded woman coming rapidly towards him whom he guessed, and guessed rightly, to be Ambroise. His exultation at seeing her thus come forth, obedient to his lure, was a little dashed by observing that she did not come alone. A few paces behind her stalked a tall fellow, that was plainly a servant and no less plainly armed. Sermois scowled grimly in the darkness at the sight of this escort; then he quitted his cover and advanced to meet and respectfully to salute the woman.

The false letter of Philippe Sermois, so cunningly limed to entrap a guilty woman, proved to the full, though he was unaware of it, as apt to ensnare an innocent woman. Ambroise took the letter just for what it professed to be, a message to her husband and to her from a youth that had once been a favourite and a friend, and that now in an extremity of peril naturally turned his thoughts to them. Had her husband been at home, he and she would have gone to François together. Her husband being abroad, she would go herself, and as the hour was not late, she decided that she need take with her for the show of security no more than a single servant, whose mere presence would be enough to protect her from any importunate beggar or drunken fellow.

"Are you he who bore me a letter?" Ambroise asked when she was close to Sermois.

"I am he," Sermois answered. He spoke in a low voice and he kept his face in shadow that Ambroise might not recognize him. "My poor friend François Villon is sadly hurt and cries eagerly to see you."

"Poor lad! poor lad!" Ambroise murmured compassionately; but, as Sermois might have noted if his brain had been cooler, with none of that passion of agony which must needs haunt a woman's voice that was speaking of her lover. "Guide me to him at once. Is the house far?"

"It is not very far," replied Sermois, and, turning, led the way in silence. In silence Ambroise followed, with the tall servant silently behind, wondering, it may be, a little at the whimsy which impelled his lady to take a walk abroad at such an unusual time. The thoughts of Ambroise were wholly concerned with the fate of François. She felt sincerely sorry for him. She recalled his blitheness and wit as a page, his later promise, his strange fall from grace, ending in the not unjust action of Messire Robert, and her pity trembled into tears. Sermois, going darkly ahead, imagined her to be racked with shameful emotions and rejoiced in the thought.

CHAPTER XXXIV

TABARIE HAS A SHOCK

WHEN Guy returned to the mouse-trap house and his fellow counter-plotters, he hastened to pay René his share of hire, and to deliver an account of his interview with Sermois and of Philippe's grim promise to pay the prisoned Villon a speedy visit. François was tickled with the picture his fancy conjured of the surprise on the unwholesome countenance of Sermois, when he should find that his imagined victim was very much at liberty. The device he imagined was that René should admit Sermois and conduct him to where François lay seemingly bound and helpless, though in reality so artfully fettered, that it was the easiest thing in the world to shake off the pinions and clap a hand on the dagger that was concealed beneath his coat. But as Villon had no mind to take up his captive attitude too soon, he instructed Guy Tabarie to wait in the street at some little distance from the house until he saw Philippe Sermois approaching, when he was to return at top speed and warn his comrades of the enemy's approach. To this suggestion Tabarie cheerfully agreed on consideration that he was accorded a flask of wine to keep him company, and this privilege being conceded, he slipped out again into the street, and niched himself in a convenient corner to drink and keep a look out.

Now, what with repeated applications to the bottle and what with continual meditation upon the attractions of Huguette, Guy Tabarie found himself beginning to sink into a condition of drowsy ecstasy. To stir himself from this lethargy he quitted his corner and began to walk a little way further down the street to see if he could catch sight of his

expected quarry. He expected, of course, only to discern a single figure, so when he saw in the near distance a company of three persons advancing towards him, he drew aside into a doorway and crouched there, with his natural instinct for avoiding observation but with no suspicion of the consequence of his act. Then a big man passed close by him whom he knew, too late, to be Philippe Sermois, and then, just as Tabarie was making ready to dodge across the road and slip ahead of the enemy, a woman passed him whose face within her hood he saw very plainly as he crouched, and the sight well-nigh deprived him of his senses. For it seemed to the astonished fellow that he beheld the unforgettable face of Huguette, of Huguette whom he had left but a few short minutes before in the company of François and René in the mouse-trap house.

In the daytime Guy Tabarie was a despiser of witchcraft and apparitions. In the night-time he was not so brave. Now his knees shook, his breath came thickly and a mist floated before his eyes. Through the mist he saw dimly the figure of Huguette follow closely the figure of Sermois, to be followed in its turn by a man that carried a sword and looked like some lord's serving-man. All three were plainly going with one accord towards the house wherein Villon was waiting.

What did it mean? Tabarie asked himself, and could find no answer to his question. All he knew was that he had seen the face of Huguette quite plainly, but how Huguette could have quitted the house and the company of François in order to don a woman's habit and walk the night with Sermois the enemy was more than he could by any means comprehend. For all that he was such a fat fellow, it seemed to him that the bones embedded in his bulky carcass were rattling with terror. Indeed, he was so thoroughly upset by the unexpected, inexplicable vision that some appreciable seconds of do-nothingness had slipped by before he came sufficiently to himself to realize that he had not delivered to his companions the appointed warning.

In the hope to make amends he hurried as swiftly as he could in the footsteps of the party, clinging to the shadow

of the houses and skirting the pools of moonlight delicately. But for all his pains, he was unable to make up for lost time, and only came within hail of the mouse-trap as Sermois advanced to the door and raised his hand to strike upon its surface. Guy came abruptly to a halt, but it seemed to him that Sermois, as he struck the door, turned his head slightly, as if glancing in his direction.

For a brief space of silence the new-comers stood and waited in the deserted street. Then came the sound of descending footsteps from the inside of the house; bolts were drawn, a key was turned; then the door was opened a little way and the face of René appeared in the aperture and the hand of René uplifted a lantern.

It may be that Sermois had caught a glimpse of Tabarie dodging in the open; it may be that he was surprised to find René facing him instead of the familiar janitor. It may be that the wish to have as little company as might be in the house prompted his conduct. René, himself taken not a little aback by finding himself in the presence of three people when he had only expected to find one, muttered a hurried explanation to the effect that the servant had been taken ill all of a sudden and was keeping his bed.

Sermois only nodded in response. He took the lantern from the hand of René and held it aloft, so that it illuminated fitfully the gaunt hall and the great staircase sweeping away from it.

"Enter," he said gravely, and Ambroise entered with her hood drawn close about her face, followed by her servant. When they had crossed the threshold, Sermois took René by the arm. "Fetch the physician," he ordered in a loud voice, and then before René could realize what was about to happen, Sermois had thrust him into the street and swung to the door behind him.

René, gaping in amazement at the black inanity of the mansion from which he had been so dexterously expelled, was suddenly aware of Guy Tabarie standing by his side and gaping also.

"Why, in the devil's name, did you not give the signal?"

René snarled, glad of something to vent his spleen upon. But Tabarie only answered his question by another.

"Did you see her?" he stammered. René glared at him, wondering aimlessly what was to be done now.

"See who?" he snapped.

"Huguette," gasped Tabarie.

"What are you talking about?" René asked angrily. "I left Huguette upstairs only a moment ago."

Guy shook his head. "Then there is magic in the matter," he said solemnly, "for I tell you it was Huguette who entered the house just now under your nose."

René frowned furiously upon him.

"Have you gone mad, that you jabber such nonsense? There was, indeed, a woman, though I did not see her face; but I wonder what she has come here for and who was with her, and I wonder what we ought to do that are shut out here, and I wonder what is going on within?"

And in an ebullition of impotent rage René shook his fist at the grim and unresponsive mouse-trap.

CHAPTER XXXV

FRANÇOIS HAS A SHOCK

FRANÇOIS, Huguette and René whiled away the time of Tabarie's absence with a game of cards. Their pack was thumbed and greasy and grimy; it had once been gaily painted with fantastic effigies and emblems that were still discernible under the husk of time. Villon was in high spirits, for he was winning, and it always made him merry to win at cards, though his winnings were, as in this case, but a few of the pitifulest of small coins. Therefore he let his fancy swing, and found tales and rhymes for each of the pictured cards after a fashion that delighted Huguette, who clapped her palms on her slim legs in applause. René was losing, albeit from sheer force of habit he was cheating like a Greek. His duplicities would not succeed, and though he had trained himself to carry the smooth face of the professional gambler, in his heart he was something vexed at the merriment of his friend. Yet the merriment beguiled the time so that the players lost heed of its passing and were abruptly shaken from their indifference by a knocking at the street door. The cards fell from the gaming fingers and the gamesters stared at one another in amaze.

"That," said René in a whisper, "is the rascal's own summons."

Villon whistled softly.

"Why the devil did not Guy give us warning?"

René shrugged his shoulders.

"Lord knows! Anyways, I must go down and open."

François extended an arresting hand.

"Remember my instructions. You are to leave this fel-

low to me unless you find him practise foul play. This is not a three-to-one ambuscade, but a man-to-man encounter."

René smiled a pitying smile. He preferred to play for safety because it was surer and took less time. But he was willing to humour his colleague so long as humouring was good for him. Quietly he quitted the room. Huguette, across the table, reached out a hand to François, who clasped it.

"Good luck to you, lad," she said. "I pray the fair saints to keep you from harm. I suppose the saints would not scorn even the prayers of me."

"I take it," said François gravely, "that the saints are gentlemen and hearken to the voice of a woman."

Between them they gathered up the cards and the vessels they had been using and carried them into the little room that opened off from the great chamber, and that was concealed from it by the heavy hangings that adorned the latter. Here, according to the plan planned, François was to lie on a low couch which hid their store of arms, and pretend to be pinioned, while Huguette was to stand out of sight behind a fold of the arras. But now, when events seemed not to be moving smoothly upon their ordered course, François stood and waited behind the curtains, peeping through the slightest chink to watch for the coming of Sermois. It would not, he reflected, take him a moment to regain the couch and affect captivity and helplessness.

He surveyed with a new curiosity the handsome room with its lamps and rugs and mirrors, and tapestries and rich furniture, all in such strange contrast to the sordidness of the rest of the house. It was odd to think that no gleam of all that brilliancy of light and colour glanced through the shuttered blackness of the outside. These thoughts were dissipated by a faint sound of voices afar off in the depths of the house. There came the light sound of a step on the stair that was never surely the footstep of Sermois. Villon found himself all a-tingle with anticipation of he knew not what. Then astonishment struck

him so hard a blow that it nearly unseated reason. For the hangings at the far end of the room parted and through the parting the Lady Ambroise d'Estouteville entered the room.

CHAPTER XXXVI

INSIDE THE MOUSE-TRAP

THIS is what was happening within as the door closed in the face of René de Montigny and Guy Tabarie standing in the street.

Sermois turned to Ambroise, and with a reverence, handed her the lantern. "Will you mount," he requested, "to the first floor, where it is lit. I will see to your servant and follow you."

Ambroise, unsuspicious, thinking kind thoughts of François, took the lantern from the treacherous fingers and began slowly to mount the stair. She noted without surprise the stately play of the staircase, the grandeur of the panelled walls. There were many ruined houses in Paris with which she was familiar that had changed occupants with changed fortunes.

As she moved upward the servant stood stolidly blinking at the mounting light and waiting for orders. He had not long to wait. Sermois plucked a dagger from his belt and struck once in the right place under the ear, and the man lurched forward silently, ended, and Sermois deftly caught him and propped him on a settle in a corner and left him there fountaining his blood. Then Sermois turned and skipped, two steps at a time, up the stairs in the track of the Lady Ambroise.

The noiseless work of a few desperate seconds, bringing no disturbance to the calm of Ambroise, had allowed her no more than to reach the turn of the stair. As she took the turn, she saw dimly by the flicker of the lantern her servitor seated on the settle in the well of space below, and her guide hurrying up the steps after her. She con-

tinued on her course, still under the spell of a fastidious pity, still tranquilly empty of alarm. In front of her was a landing faintly lit by a swinging lamp. As she paused, her guide had gained her and halted by her side.

What wild passion of triumph thrilled him then, heedless of one brand of blood-guiltiness the more, quivering with desire about to gain, confident of that conquest beyond which nothing mattered!

"This way, lady," he said solemnly, and as he spoke he dragged aside a heavy velvet curtain and made a space through which he motioned her to pass. Ambroise advanced and Sermois followed her and the curtain dropped behind them.

Ambroise found herself in a splendid chamber, most unlike the ragged garret which she had thought she was being brought to visit. She turned in questioning surprise to her companion. A black mantle lay in a heap upon the floor. By her side stood a man with a flaming, evil, not unfamiliar face, a man habited at all points like a great noble.

Ambroise was a soldier's daughter and a soldier's wife; she did not know the colour of fear; but she was startled and taken aback, and at first she could find no words for her surprise as she stared into the flushed and gloating face that fixed her. She forced her disturbed senses to rally and she spoke.

"Where is François Villon? How comes François Villon into such a house?"

Philippe Sermois made her an elaborate bow.

"François Villon is here, as you shall very presently see. He comes to be in this house because this house is mine, and I have chosen to lodge him here because of the dear love I bear him."

There was, on the face of it, nothing incredible or even improbable in the words that Ambroise heard. It was far from impossible that some wealthy gentleman might have chosen to play the patron to so able a youth as Villon. But, nevertheless, Ambroise was instantly confident that she was being deceived, and she began to be-

lieve that she had to deal with a madman. She was very sure that she herself was in imminent danger, but the knowledge did not shake her; it only warned her to be wary.

"Surely," she said in a steady voice, "I know your face? Surely I should know your name?"

Sermois bowed again with the same pompous floridity that gave an added sinister to his appearance.

"I had the honour to be presented to you a little while ago in your husband's house as the Count Filippo da Sermese."

She remembered him now; one of a number of other Italianate gentlemen that came to the Provost's house in a great man's train; one that had paid her some disdained compliments.

"Will you bring me to François Villon?" she commanded quietly, and strove to smile.

"By and by," Sermois answered. "Time and to spare. But I promise you shall see him presently, because you love him so dearly."

Ambroise frowned. She was aware of peril she did not understand, of a mystification she could not pierce.

"François Villon is an old friend of mine whom I used to like, and whom I should still like well, if he were wiser. I like him well enough to visit him when he calls from a sick-bed."

Philippe grinned evilly.

"You would be private with him. I think you must love him in private, if you like him well enough to loll in his arms in public."

Now Ambroise felt sure of the madness of her companion.

"You speak under some strange error——" she began, but Sermois interrupted her brutally.

"Error," he cried, "error! Here is no error. Do you think I did not see you by his side last night under the Tower of St. Jacques?"

Ambroise flamed with fierce anger that banished prudence.

"This passes excuse," she cried hotly. "I will go hence at once. Stand back and let me pass!"

For Sermois had shifted his stand a little so as to place himself between her and the way out.

"Stand back!" she commanded again, "or I will call my servant."

Sermois laughed at her.

"You will have to call very loud, and you will call to no avail, for your servant lies below, dead in his blood. I killed him so cunningly that he made no sound. I can do so when I choose. Also, I can kill otherwise when I choose."

Even at this grim news, which now she did not question, Ambroise showed no sign of fear.

"If you do not let me go," she said firmly, fixing him with her steadfast eyes, "I will call for help; I will rouse the street."

"Fair lady," said Sermois ironically, "that also would be of no avail. For these walls are muffled and shuttered with silence through which your cries would make no more noise than the chirping of a mouse or the whimpering of a child."

"Messer da Sermese——" Ambroise began, seeking somehow to temporize, somehow to gain control, but having no knowledge of what she ought to say. Again Sermois interrupted her.

"To the devil with Sermese!" he cried. "Call me plain Philippe Sermois, that saw you and longed for you years ago in Saumur. You did not know of my existence, but I knew of yours, and I swore that I should win you. I shall keep my word. I swore that I would kill François Villon. I keep my word."

"Is François Villon dead?" she cried, in a sudden anguish that for a moment shut out her own danger. Sermois shook his head.

"He still lives," he said, "but he shall not live long. He shall live long enough to see me command you, for you are mine as he is mine. You shall go free when I

am done with you, for I do not think you will care to betray to-night's adventure."

"Is François Villon here?" Ambroise cried aloud. Sermois sneered.

"You need not raise your voice, for it will not serve you. François Villon is here indeed, but he is here a helpless prisoner."

"Not quite helpless," said François Villon quietly, as he parted the curtains and came into the room.

CHAPTER XXXVII

MASTER MOUSE AND MASTER RAT

AMBROISE gave a little cry of joy. Philippe Sermois gave a choking growl of fury. His sword was out in a moment, but François had a sword too, and it was naked in his hand. Sermois paused in his first impulse to rush and his features worked horridly.

"Philippe Sermois," said François composedly, "it is a foolish thing to count your chickens before they are hatched. Also, it is a foolish thing to sell the skin of the lion before you have caught your lion. But it is a much more foolish thing to think that François Villon is as foolish as yourself."

"I told you I should kill you," Sermois screamed. "I will kill you now and your body shall serve as my pillow."

"That is as it may be," said François cheerfully. "That is for the High Gods to decide."

As he spoke he stepped briskly forward, and suddenly catching at the wrist of Ambroise, drew her sharply behind him, so that he stood between her and Sermois. It seemed as if that sight proved too much for the temper of Sermois, for he charged at him bullishly as if he would cut him to the earth.

But François, with the name of Gilbert glowing on his heart, met the attack with an ease and firmness that baffled his enemy. Villon was to the full as skilful as Sermois; Villon was younger, and for all Villon's intemperance, it was as the temperance of an anchorite as compared with the intemperance that had sucked the marrow and fouled the blood of Sermois.

Therefore Sermois drew back after a stroke or two and

held up his left hand in sign that he desired a parley.

"Let us cry quits," he said. "I have played a game wherein I have lost the hazard. The lady has come to no hurt. If she and you will but pass me your words to forget this matter and never bring it up against me, why, you may go your ways in safety and I will not trouble you again."

François was willing to smile at this new way of wiliness. He was conscious that Ambroise was looking at him, and that there was curiosity in her look. He had not lowered his point, and he did not lower it now as he answered the cunning appeal of Philippe Sermois.

"So Master Rat will pass his promise not to molest Master Mouse again if only Master Mouse will be simple enough to trust to the word of honour of Master Rat. The security is not good enough, believe me, Master Rat. But if it were good, if I could take your word for gospel, I should still say you nay. I will not speak of that poor fellow whom you basely boast to have slain unawares below, and whose blood is crying to Heaven for vengeance against you. I will speak only, and speak very little, of the insult you have offered to a dear lady, and say, no, Master Rat, no. I thank God that I have learned to handle my weapon, and I trust God to stiffen the arm of your executioner."

François heard Ambroise behind him clap her hands quickly together, and he knew that he had spoken as she would have him speak. François saw the look on Philippe's face, and knew that he had spoken the words that would goad him to desperation. François plucked a dagger from his bosom and flung it on to the floor behind him.

"For you," he cried, "if I fall." He could hear Ambroise stoop and pick up the weapon. Sermois gave a howl of rage and raised his sword to charge again. But even as he did so he paused, for the curtains in front of him parted again and Huguette came into the room.

"Who in the devil's name are you?" Sermois gasped, staring at Huguette and trembling as he spoke.

"I will tell you," said François. "This is the girl you made use of to trick Messire de Beauvau years ago in Saumur. It may interest you to know that I was a witness of that trickery and was able to undeceive Messire de Beauvau later. This is the girl that sat with me last night under the Tower of St. Jacques, the girl whom you in your baseness took for my lady here. It is no great marvel that these two should resemble, seeing that they are both daughters of the same father. But it is a great marvel and a proof of the justice of Heaven that thanks to this resemblance you should be taken in your own snare."

"Curse your preaching!" snarled Sermois. "I have failed. Let me go."

"Not so," François answered. He turned to Ambroise and saluted her. "You are quite safe now," he said. "Will you go with your sister? She will take you to safety, while this fellow and I make an end of our quarrel."

Huguette strode to the side of Ambroise.

"He is risking his life for you, sister," she said. "Will you not stand by him while he risks it?"

"Very surely, sister," answered Ambroise quietly. "I had no other thought."

Huguette never tired to tell of the fight that followed, though Villon seldom willingly spoke of it again. It seemed at once to last for ever and to pass like a breath; to rage in darkness and to sway through sheets of flame. Since Villon had learned swordplay from Gilbert he had known occasion, time and again, to air his craft and his blade. But those were no more than scuffles where to draw blood meant to win, if, indeed, it came to blood-letting at all, and did not end after a clattering pass or two. This was another-guess business, with life to win or lose, with death to deal or gain. François became unconscious of the two beautiful women standing together, side by side, their faces, so strangely similar, fixed so intently upon him. He only saw Sermois; he only felt his own resolute resolve to do justice upon him, and his own intimate surety that by the favour of Heaven such jus-

tice should be done. And so the quarrel raged and trampled across the great gaudy room till the end came that was appointed—did it come after many years or only after a few instants?—and the sword of François found its way home, and François knew that he had won his game.

Villon could never in later days recall with any clearness of mental appreciation the nature of his emotions at that emphatic, staggering moment, when he saw Sermois lying in a bloody huddle at his feet. The mere crude, raw fact of violent death—for as well as he could afterwards recall he had no doubt in his mind that Sermois was a dead man—the mere fact of violent death was not and could not be in itself startling in novelty, in its cruel intrusion into an order of things marked by habitual tranquillity and law-abiding decorum. A young man, whose childhood had been passed in the Paris of the English occupation, must needs have come to regard a violent death as one of the more obvious and frequent means of quitting a turbulent world. But to be familiar with violent death is one thing, and—for a person of Villon's temperament and age—to deal out violent death is quite another thing. Wherefore his act had unexpected consequences.

In the first place, he felt horribly sick. He would have liked to stagger to the nearest corner and vomit. In the second place, he felt horribly frightened. He would have liked to seek immediate shelter, ducking into some deep cellar or climbing to some skyey garret from dreaded, inevitable pursuit. With one stroke of his hand he had shattered the thin, transparent partition between himself and the grim goddess of justice. The lean gibbet of Montfaucon seemed to be branded upon the wreck of his intellect. The hemp was spun for the rope, the rope was swung for his neck. As he thought, swiftly and instantly, of these terrors, it was all that he could do to restrain himself from screaming aloud. Ages seemed to go by in this effort of restraint, and still Sermois lay in that bloody huddle on the floor, and still Villon tussled with

his terrors. Ages that were only seconds and very few seconds.

Then through the mist of his fear and horror the cool voice of Ambroise slid like sunlight.

"François," she said, "you have done a man's deed for a woman and the woman thanks you."

François made a motion with his hand across his face as if to wipe away the mist that bewildered him. The mechanical action brought with it mental clarity. He saw that Huguette was bending over the senseless form of Sermois. The girl looked up.

"He is not dead," she said, "but he will surely die. I have knowledge of wounds. Were it not well for you to finish him off and have done with him, that he may not peach?"

François looked to Ambroise in appeal for leading and Ambroise answered his glance.

"If the villain lives," she said, "he must be left to live, he must even be helped to live, lest justice be defeated."

Huguette rose to her feet and shrugged her shoulders. François questioned her and his voice sounded queer and thick.

"Where are the others?" he gasped. "Where are René and Guy?"

"I will go see," answered Huguette, and quitted the room. Ambroise, in her turn, bent over the senseless man and gave his wound such tending as she could. François dropped heavily into a chair and stared dully at her.

"François," said Ambroise, "this is a grave matter for you. This man has a great patron, has great friends. You, I grieve to have to say it, carry a bad name. The whole tale is an ugly tangle which binds the innocent with the guilty. Perhaps I am too jealous of my good name, too anxious, if it were possible, to keep it free of to-night's adventure. But I think if you were willing to go away from Paris for a while, it would give time for the matter to blow by and be forgotten, and my husband could whis-

per the truth of the matter into the highest ears and ensure your pardon."

François nodded agreement. He was as wishful to go as she could be. He realized well enough how easy it might be for the vengeance of the friends of Sermois to do him a mischief, however much he might have been in the right in the brawl. He was hot, too, heart and soul, to help to keep the name of Ambroise out of the story. Sermois, if he lived to tell it, would do as much for his own sake.

Huguette returned to the room, followed by René and Guy trailing between them the released servitor of Sermois.

"Friends," said François, "it is wise for me to quit Paris for a while. When I am in safe asylum I will let you know. Escort this lady, who is the wife of my lord Robert of Estouteville, to the Provost's house and bid this serving-man summon the Watch and dispose of the rascal who was his master."

The faces of Guy and René were open pages in the book of the world's wonder as they gaped from Ambroise to Huguette and from Huguette to Ambroise, and began dimly to realize the complexity of the web in which they were involved. François turned to Ambroise.

"Farewell, dear lady," he said. "If it has been my good fortune to serve you, I have proved of more use in the world than I had hoped, for this many a long day, ever to be."

"Good-bye, François," Ambroise answered gently. "You deserve to be remembered and your friends will not forget you. Farewell."

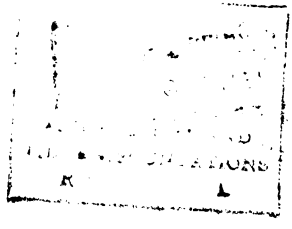
François listened like a man in a dream and acted like a man in a dream. As in a dream, he kissed the hand of Ambroise and clasped the hand of Huguette. As in a dream, he passed down the great staircase and by the dead body of the servant and so out into the night. He found himself thinking queerly of the vanity of all human aspirations. Here was this enemy of his, this strong, lusty fellow, that was so packed with ambitions, so hot in his

sins, so confident of his power to win the world's prizes, now no more than meaningless clay because of the prick of an inch or so of steel.

François shuddered and quickened his pace. In the distance behind him he could hear the shouting of the Watch and see the gleaming of their torches. Suddenly he heard footsteps running swiftly in his direction. Wondering dully if he were being pursued, he turned round and saw a slender figure cutting the darkness. In another moment Huguette was by him and had flung her arms about his neck.

"François," she whispered, "if you must go into exile, at least you shall not go alone."

THE END



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